

It Girls and Old Maids:  
Satiric Wit and the Single Woman in the Anglo-American Novel (1918-1958)

Claire Barwise

A dissertation  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
University of Washington

2020

Reading Committee:

Jessica Burstein, chair

Sydney Kaplan

Juliet Shields

Program authorized to offer degree:

English

© Copyright 2020

Claire Barwise

University of Washington

**Abstract**

It Girls and Old Maids:

Satiric Wit and the Single Woman in the Anglo-American Novel (1918-1958)

Claire Barwise

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Associate Professor Jessica Burstein

Department of English

“It Girls and Old Maids: Satiric Wit and the Single Woman in the Anglo-American Novel (1918-1958)” argues for a feminist reconsideration of strategic humor in popular women’s novels. Spanning the decades between the first successful suffrage laws in Britain and the United States and second-wave feminism of the 1960s, the British and American “modernist middlebrow” novels I examine both challenge and align with literary convention; they each take on traditional subjects for women’s novels, yet their narrative strategies and use of satiric humor set them apart from literature which conforms to patriarchal tropes. Their techniques situate them within a feminist literary history, thus expanding an understanding of feminist intellectual work in the often over-looked decades between the “waves” of feminism. This dissertation highlights women’s satire as a mode of resistance, one which has gone largely ignored by critics due to a definition of satire that privileges aggression. Such a definition ignores the social and cultural pressures against women engaging in any mode of humor, let alone one defined by critique. Therefore, “It Girls and Old Maids” proposes a revised definition of satiric humor, one that

better accommodates a long female history which has necessarily had to be less overt in its presentation.

This dissertation offers readings of novels by Rebecca West, Anita Loos, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Winnifred Watson, Barbara Pym and Elaine Dundy and argues that humor is key to their negotiation with their audience, allowing these novelists to challenge normative conventions while still maintaining their popular appeal, and to make radical positions more palatable to an audience that might be ambivalent about more overt feminist efforts. Furthermore, “It Girls and Old Maids” proposes that when popular women novelists engage satiric humor in their treatment of traditionally female genres such as the romantic fantasy or fairy tale, they preserve the transformative potential of such fantasies while also critiquing their more limiting and patriarchal iterations. Finally, by focusing on the single female narrators of these novels, who fit into the social types of either the “It Girl” or the “Spinster,” I demonstrate how these authors both exploit and subvert single women’s identity categories to challenge the heteronormative status quo.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>5</b>
A SINGULAR PERSPECTIVE .....	5
A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SPINSTER AND THE IT GIRL.....	11
<i>Changing Roles</i> .....	11
<i>Literary Perspectives</i> .....	15
FUNNY MONEY: HUMOR, GENDER, AND THE MIDDLEBROW .....	19
IT GIRLS, SPINSTERS, AND SATIRIC HUMOR.....	26
CHAPTER OVERVIEW.....	35
<b>1. ROMANTIC SATIRE IN REBECCA WEST’S RETURN OF THE SOLIDER AND ANITA LOOS’ .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b><i>GENTLEMEN PREFER BLONDES</i>.....</b>	<b>41</b>
INTRODUCTION.....	41
REBECCA WEST’S FEMINISM .....	47
“[W]HAT IS THE GOOD OF ALL THESE SPINSTERS?”.....	50
THE SPINSTER NARRATOR AS UNRELIABLE ROMANTIC .....	56
“QUEER[ING] ALL JUDGEMENT”: WEST’S SATIRIC DISJUNCTIONS .....	64
ANITA LOOS: LITERARY IT GIRL.....	73
A PARTY IS ONLY AS GOOD AS ITS GUESTS: AN INVITATION TO ACTIVE READERSHIP.....	80
A GIRL LIKE WE: DOROTHY AND LORELEI AS FICTIONAL UNIT .....	84
“[N]O COUNTRY FOR WE GIRLS”: EXPOSING THE HYPOCRISY OF THE MARRIAGE PLOT.....	90
CONCLUSION.....	97
<b>2. BEWITCHING FREEDOMS: ALTERNATE FANTASIES IN SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER’S LOLLY WILLOWES (1926) AND WINIFRED WATSON’S MISS PETTIGREW LIVES FOR A DAY (1938).....</b>	<b>100</b>
INTRODUCTION.....	100
<i>Middlebrow Enchantments</i> .....	102
<i>Fairy Tales, Feminism, Modernism</i> .....	107
<i>Unconventional Erotics</i> .....	110
LOLLY WILLOWES (1926).....	113
<i>Questions of Genre</i> .....	113
“[A]s Common as Blackberries”: <i>The Feminist Significance of the Dianic Tradition</i> .....	115
“[A] Skillful and Experienced Naturalist”: <i>Warner’s Strategic Irony</i> .....	125
<i>Cabbages and Carnality: Warner’s Treatment of Sexuality</i> .....	127
MISS PETTIGREW LIVES FOR A DAY (1938).....	135
<i>A Spinster Fairy Tale</i> .....	135
“An Enchanted World”: <i>The Function of Cinema and Fantasy</i> .....	143
CONCLUSION.....	150
<b>3. TOWARDS A NEW FEMINIST SATIRE: .....</b>	<b>152</b>
<b>BARBARA PYM’S EXCELLENT WOMEN AND ELAINE DUNDY’S THE DUD AVOCADO ....</b>	<b>152</b>
INTRODUCTION.....	152
“A POSITIVE RATHER THAN A NEGATIVE STATE”: NEW VISIONS OF SPINSTERDOM AND SEXUAL LIBERTY .....	159
SELF-DEPRECAATION UNSETTLED.....	164

SATIRE IS ANTHROPOLOGICAL: TURNING A CRITICAL EYE ON THE ROMANTIC FANTASY..... 181  
“YOU MAKE EVERYTHING INTO A JOKE”: HUMOR AS SELF-RESCUE..... 186  
INDEX OF POSSIBILITY: READING FOR OUR LIVES..... 189  
**CONCLUSION..... 195**  
**BIBLIOGRAPHY..... 210**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not exist without the encouragement, guidance, and of course, sharp wit of Jessica Burstein. It was in her modernism seminar that half of the first chapter was born, and through her that I discovered the rich tradition of modernist middlebrow novels. In the early stages of developing a prospectus, her enthusiasm and open-mindedness gave me permission to begin not with a problem to be solved, but with a love to be explored and shared. Her mentorship demanded rigor, intellectual integrity, and countless drafts, but it never diminished the pleasure I found in these novels. Her feedback pushed me to be a better writer and thinker, and I'm truly grateful for the high standard to which I was held. My other committee members were also integral to the success of this project. Juliet Shields provided guidance at every stage, and her insights and wisdom helped shape both process and product. Sydney Kaplan's wonderful seminars were foundational to my conception of modernism, and her attention to biography was influential in the development of my argument in Chapter One. Mika Ahuvia, of the Jewish Studies department, generously provided knowledge and feedback on Chapter Two. In short, I have spent the past three years in the best company, surrounded by wise and witty women both on the page and off.

My friends and colleagues at the University of Washington kept me motivated and sane— thanks Mandy McCourt and Elizabeth Boyle for inspiring me with your passion, and Alex McCauley, Sarah Faulkner, and Matt Poland, for the countless pre-pandemic coffee shop work sessions, without which I'm fairly certain I never would have finished. Positivity is in short supply in academia, and I'm especially grateful for Sarah's rallying spirit, as well as her editorial acumen, both of which pulled me out of the weeds at the eleventh hour.

I would not be here, literally or figuratively, without the love and encouragement of my friends on the East Coast. Thanks to Emily Cooke, who suggested Elaine Dundy to me, and, on a beach in Puerto Rico, inadvertently roused my passion for the middlebrow. You will always be my favorite person to talk to about books. Paul Gasbarra walked across the Brooklyn Bridge with me and told me I belonged in graduate school, and I never would have started this journey at all without Lee Pinkas, who inspired me to discover what lay beyond Brooklyn. Thank you all for believing in me.

Finally, my family. Jon and Mary Ellen Barwise are the reasons I am a reader, the reason I find it impossible to imagine a life without books. I owe all the qualities that have gotten me here to their example—patience, pleasure in sharing knowledge, disdain for pretension, limitless curiosity. It gives me so much joy to follow in their footsteps of studying and teaching what I love. My siblings, Melanie and Jon, have supported me every step of the way, and I'm so grateful for their friendship. Finally, thanks to Peter, who ruined my plans for spinsterhood, but whose warmth, humor, and love have made these years the best yet.

## INTRODUCTION

“The position of an unmarried woman—unless of course, she is somebody’s mistress, is of no interest whatsoever to the reader of modern fiction. The beginning of a novel?”

—Barbara Pym, *A Very Private Eye*

**A Singular Perspective**

The It Girl of the young twentieth century: provocative in her combination of youth and experience, like the dewy skin above her red painted lips. A long cigarette dangles off her fingers, which her surrounding admirers rush to light. She might wear a stole given by one lover, pearls bequeathed by another. The “it,” of course, is sex: she is a creature born of male desire, breathed into being in negligee or on a nightclub stage. When she enters a room, all heads turn.

Now imagine the spinster, as old (at least in spirit) as the century is young. She wears sturdy, sensible shoes. Her neatly buttoned cardigan is the same mousy brown as her hair, save for the grey appearing at the temples. She surveys the world through spectacles, judgmental from the window of her single room, but in crowds she hurries with downcast eyes—scuttles even, lest she be singled out. Probably she is returning from church.

What could two such different women possibly have in common? In the conventional portraits above, they seem to be at opposing ends of a spectrum of female types. Yet both are single women at a time when marriage defined most women’s lives. Though the 1890s had brought a marked cultural shift, when “the laws that governed sexual identity and behavior seemed to be breaking down” (Showalter, *Sexual* 3), it would be a long time before either taking multiple sexual partners or never marrying would be unremarkable. Both the It Girl, defined here

as that single young woman who acts as a sexual and/or romantic free agent, and the spinster, a woman older in years (though not always by much) whose role in society was defined by her unmarried status, challenge the normative positioning of women in the first half of the twentieth century. When considered together, one finds illuminating parallels as well as productive points of contrast. It Girls and spinsters, being neither married nor mothers, occupy unique social positions from which to move and observe, and when we consider literature written from their narrative perspective, we gain valuable insight into previously invisible work of identity negotiation and resistance to repressive norms.

“It Girls and Old Maids” takes as its focus the decades between the historical landmarks of the first successful suffrage laws in Britain and the United States (in 1918 and 1919, respectively) and the rise of what is commonly referred to as second-wave feminism in the 1960s. Though convenient as a chronological shorthand, the wave metaphor of feminism has been usefully problematized in recent years. Linda Nicholson argues that “the wave metaphor suggests the idea that gender activism in the history of the United States has been for the most part unified around one set of ideas, and that set of ideas can be called feminism” (34). Yet the efforts of women to resist patriarchal oppression came in many forms, whether or not they went by the name of feminism at the time. Furthermore, the wave metaphor obscures the efforts between “swells” of activism. Though the 1920s and 1940s are remembered for their legal, social, and political achievements for women, these triumphs can overshadow the corresponding subtle intellectual and emotional work by women—some of whom would not have identified as feminists—of renegotiating their identity and fighting to escape the narrow parameters prescribed for them. Often this intellectual and emotional work manifested in humor, which did it no favors in being taken seriously. Similarly, the perceived fallow periods of feminist activism,

such as the 1930s and 1950s,<sup>1</sup> were, in fact, rich with exactly this kind of creative labor, which would prove foundational for the more radical efforts to follow.

Even literary histories, which should seem ideally suited to such considerations, often ignore the intellectual and creative efforts in these periods. Alison Light, whose *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (1991) provides an exception to this trend, notes how Elaine Showalter's influential feminist history *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977) "put what she saw as the doldrums of the 1930s, '40s, and early '50s between chapters, leap[ing] neatly from the experimental modernism of Woolf and her lesser acolytes to arrive rather breathlessly in the late 1950s and early 1960s when the true note of a feminism (in writers like Lessing and Drabble) could be heard again" (215). "It Girls and Old Maids" offers long-overdue scholarly attention to novels of these periods whose use of humor situates them within a feminist legacy.

Part of the reason these novels have not received more attention is because of their status as middlebrow novels targeted toward a female readership. Gender anxieties within modernism were acute; in fact, "'effeminate' [became] so pervasive an insult that women writers used it against other writers, both male and female" (Harker 2). The middlebrow, which Virginia Woolf famously called "this mixture of geniality and sentiment stuck together with a sticky slime of calves-foot jelly" ("Middlebrow" 118), triggered both intellectual and gender anxieties. Viewed as escapist balms for undiscerning feminine consumers, middlebrow romantic novels were disregarded—when not outright scorned—by the intellectual elite in the early twentieth century.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a position taken up in such histories as *Back to Home and Duty: Women between the Wars* by Deidre Beddoe (1989), *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in the Two World Wars* (1987), which views the period between the wars as one of principally of regression.

The middlebrow has been reclaimed in recent years as a rewarding site of inquiry by scholars such as Nicola Humble, Nicole Hammill, and Catherine Keyser, yet its relationship with feminism remains an ambivalent one. Many romantic middlebrow novels did reflect “a particular concentration on feminine aspects of life, a fascination with domestic space, a preoccupation with aspects of courtship and marriage” (Humble, *Feminine* 11), and this has meant their wholesale dismissal by some critics as reinforcers of oppressive tropes.<sup>2</sup> Even scholars such as Humble, who recognize subversive potential in middlebrow texts, also acknowledge that a “notional feminist politics” does little to diminish the “almost visceral contempt for women in general... found in a surprising number of middlebrow novels” (ibid. 206).

Yet there are also writers who use specifically feminine tropes, in connection with satiric humor, to subvert generic expectations and offer compelling feminist critiques. Sylvia Townsend Warner’s *Lolly Willowes* (1926), Winifred Watson’s *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* (1938), and Elaine Dundy’s *The Dud Avocado* (1958), simultaneously draw upon the appeal of the romantic novel, including the feminine subgenre of the modern fairy tale, while breaking from these genres’ expected molds to offer new, psychologically-liberating fantasies for women. “It Girls and Old Maids” also considers novels in which women’s satiric critique of heteronormative fantasy itself has been overlooked, as they have been in Rebecca West’s *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), Anita Loos’ *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925), and Barbara Pym’s *Excellent Women* (1952). Furthermore, these novels feature single women whose unmarried status is fundamental to their story, yet not regarded as an obstacle to overcome. In all too many conventional stories, one finds a woman’s single life to be a territory she must pass through on her journey to married union—at which point her story ends. In these novels, we find the

---

<sup>2</sup> See Berlant (2008).

exceptions: stories featuring single women, young and old, whose journeys are not about a waiting husband, but about independence, self-discovery, defiance, and resilience. Key to these themes, and to these novels' ability to simultaneously engage and critique their genres is their use of satiric humor.

If romantic fiction and fairy tales have traditionally been the domain of women, comedy and satire have historically been understood as that of men. Nancy Walker, in *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (1988)—one of the first scholarly treatments of women's humor—describes “sources from the mid-nineteenth century to very recently” featuring male writers “commenting—and sometimes lamenting—that women were incapable of humor” (ix). While such a statement now seems absurd, the long history of women's humor in both literature and culture has only been appreciated by scholars within the past thirty or so years, and still only receives a fraction of the attention bestowed upon the male tradition.

Yet it is especially important to consider women's humor, not only to discern how it differs from that male tradition, but because it provides unique insights into a history of patriarchal resistance. Appearing in everything from fables to newspaper columns, fiction to light verse, women's literary humor reveals much the variety of ways women responded to and opposed their prescribed roles. Walker goes on how to explain that “a dominant theme in women's humor is how it feels to be a member of a subordinate group in a culture that prides itself on equality, what it is like to try to meet standards for behavior that are based on stereotypes rather than on human beings. Women have used humor to talk to each other about their common concerns, to survive, and frequently to protest their condition” (ibid.)

The most famous variety of humor as protest is satire, a subgenre in which women's contributions are even less visible. Despite the recent valuable inroads into the field of women's

humor, only a handful of women in the first half of the twentieth century have been recognized as satirists. Until Jonathan Greenberg's reading of Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) and Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936) in his 2011 *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel*, Dorothy Parker and Mary McCarthy were the only women commonly recognized as satirists working in the era of literary modernism. The exceptionalism of Parker and McCarthy is no accident; both women were satirists in the traditional model in which "satire...emphasizes—indeed, is defined by—its intention (attack)" (Connery and Combe 5).<sup>3</sup> Yet women's satire is frequently found in texts in which attack is not the dominant mode. So while Gilbert Highet claims that "very few women have ever written satire, or even enjoyed it, although they have often been its victims" (235), this is true only when one limits her understanding of satire to a definition which privileges the traditionally masculine qualities of malice and aggression.

This dissertation proposes a revised, and more capacious, understanding of satiric humor, one that accounts for a long and rich female tradition. In doing so, it builds upon the work of Audrey Bilger in *Laughing Feminism* (1998), which "investigate[s] the intersection of feminism and comedy in the eighteenth century" (9) and demonstrates how comedy in the works of Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen "smuggles" feminism into the novel (11). Well into the twentieth century, women's satiric humor was, by necessity, less overt, often concealing the force of its critique through varied and more commercially and socially acceptable modes. These modes includes romantic realism, in the case of West; levity, in Loos,

---

<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, attention from scholars and critics did not preclude these authors from the gender bias that would inform their critical receptions for most of the twentieth century. Until recently, critics found it impossible to reconcile Parker's satire with the sincerity and alleged sentimentalism of some of her poetry, sometimes reading her critiques as "bitterness" over romantic disappointment (qtd. in Kinney 125), while McCarthy was considered "unfeminine" for the malice in her wit. Elizabeth Janeway, writing in the *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing* (1979) claimed that McCarthy's works did need not need to be reviewed in an essay on "Women's Literature" because they are "essentially masculine even if not conventionally so" (qtd. in Hewitt ii), and Elaine Showalter notes that Pauline Kael saw McCarthy's satire as "betraying other women" ("Killing" 347).

Watson, and Dundy; fairy tale motifs in Warner and Watson, and self-deprecation in Pym and Dundy. It also works in a different affective register, its censure often wryer and gentler than the “mercilessly savage attack” (Connery and Combe 2) of traditional male satire. Ultimately, “It Girls and Old Maids” argues that when popular women novelists engage satiric humor in their treatment of romance, they preserve the transformative potential of fantasy while also critiquing its more limiting and patriarchal iterations.

### **A Brief History of the Spinster and the It Girl**

#### *Changing Roles*

Both the It Girl and the spinster have a complex social and literary history. While the It Girl sparked admiration and envy in addition to consternation, both types were the focal points of controversy, and both reflected changing economic as well as social landscapes. Though older single women had always faced scrutiny, the “spinster” as type did not take recognizable form until the nineteenth century. Martha Vicinus catalogues numerous key positions single women held in preindustrial society, from managing convents to running small businesses, until “increased wealth and consolidating of bourgeois’ social values in the early nineteenth century condemned spinsters to unremitting idleness and marginal positions in the home, church, and workplace” (3). The spinster was a middle-class phenomenon, distinct from an unmarried lower or working-class woman, and her pitiable social status was not only due to her lack of a husband, but to her financial dependence either on family or on three “underpaid and overcrowded” occupations: companion, seamstress, or governess (Vicinus 3). The It Girl, too, was born out of a world that was changing not only socially but materially and commercially. She could not have achieved her iconic status without the commercial proliferation of mass culture: films that could

be seen by wide audiences, heavily-circulating periodicals (including fan magazines), and best-selling novels (often released in connection with these films).

Neither type would have caused such intense reactions if they did not seem to be threateningly ubiquitous, whether literally or culturally: signs of a shifting world rather than anomalous outliers. The spinster, though always socially deviant in her failure to wed, went from being a quiet oddity to a glaring social problem as her numbers grew. The “odd woman” became widely regarded as a demographic, economic, and even moral problem of the 1890s, with socio-demographic imbalance “interpreted as a sign of universal disequilibrium— a fall, as it were, from a ‘natural’ state of harmony between males and females” (Melman 18). After WWI decimated the male population of Europe, this “disequilibrium” intensified; in 1921 the British Census publicly claimed “2 million superfluous women in Britain” (Joannou 79). Many of these women had served patriotically in the war and were even self-supporting, but despite this fact—or indeed, because of it—the reaction against them was often that of distrust and contempt, especially from men who saw them as a threat to both traditional gender roles and job security. In 1916, social psychologist Walter Gallichen wrote, “It is questionable whether society is wise in placing the voluntary, perpetual celibate woman in positions of authority and responsibility...The quality commonly known as ‘superiority’ afflicts many of these women. In organic structure, the cast of their minds, and the trend of their feelings, they exhibit hardness and censoriousness, and are prone to tyrannise and domineer” (73). Gallichen’s warning reflects a typical response to an autonomous woman with opinions of her own.

Gallichen, like many others of his day, attributes the spinster’s “hardness” to her supposedly unnatural state of celibacy. In the post-war years, “the psychosexual stereotyping of the spinster hardened” (Hodgkins 192), and Winifred Holtby complained that women were being

told to “enjoy the full cycle of sex-experience, or they would become riddled with complexes like a rotting fruit” (qtd. in Joannou 80). In *Women: A Vindication* (1923), Catholic social theorist A.M. Ludovici linked the spinster’s perceived social threat explicitly to her sexual life, or lack thereof:

Since the spinsters of any country represent a body of human beings who are not leading natural lives, and whose fundamental instincts are able to find no normal expression or satisfaction, it follows...that the influence of this body of spinsters on the life of the nation to which they belong, must be abnormal, and therefore contrary to the normal and the natural development of that nation. (qtd. in Joannou 82)

Of course, the figment of the sexually-frustrated spinster speaks more to collective imagination than reality.<sup>4</sup> In truth, there were as many kinds of spinsters as there are kinds of women: some who had had conventional aspirations to marry and some making the positive choice to remain single, for a variety of reasons. There were also those in romantic and/or sexual relationships with other women, for it goes without saying that the “full cycle of sex-experience” at the time was understood to be heterosexual, and that “the loosening in the 1920s of sexual taboos extended only to non-marital heterosexual activity” (ibid.). Yet the tendency persisted, and indeed persists today,<sup>5</sup> toward homogenizing characterization: spinsters were at best, pitiable, at worst, unnatural or perverse—a threat to social harmony. The traditional model of a family, and

---

<sup>4</sup> The obscenity trial over Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) should give a sense of the public attitude to romantic love between women. Despite the book having no explicit sexual scenes, and Hall taking a pitying rather than a celebratory view of her subject, the book caused scandal and outrage and was subsequently banned. Joannou notes that the taboos on homosexual activity exemplified in the trial did “much to break the patterns of emotional dependency between women in the 1914 war” (81).

<sup>5</sup> The questions Virginia Nicholson poses in 2007’s *Singled Out* about “Surplus Women” share the pity, condescension, and even fear that observers expressed a century ago: “Why didn’t they ever marry? Did they mind? Did they harbor secret sadness? What did they do about the lack of love in their lives, and the lack of sex? Did they care that they never had children? Did their spectacles and tweed jackets protect them from terrible vulnerabilities?... Would one end up like them, with just cats for company?” (xi)

indeed, of a gendered social order, had been increasingly under threat since the turn of the century, and the threat only intensified with the turmoil of and following WWI. The spinster was an ideal target for these anxieties, contributing to a stigma that continues to this day.

These disruptive social forces of the early twentieth century were also integral to the rise of the It Girl. Though she was a largely fictional rather than literal phenomenon, she too threatened the status quo. As Martha Orgeron points out, the It Girl's identity must be understood in the context of "widespread concerns in the 1920s about Hollywood's influence on a fantastical kind of female sexuality represented in many of the magazines and films of the day" (76). The sexuality Orgeron describes as "fantastical" was, among other things, overt and knowing: the It Girl was aware of her power and could use it, even when she presented herself as naively unconscious of her charm. An early scene of the silent film *It* (1927),<sup>6</sup> in which a young woman (played by original It Girl, Clara Bow) maneuvers her way into the arms of her handsome employer, offers the following definition: "IT is that peculiar quality which some persons possess, which attracts others of the opposite sex...IT draws all others with magnetic force... 'IT' can be a quality of the mind as well as a physical attraction." Part of this "quality of mind" was confidence, for the It Girl, like the flapper of the 1920s, enjoyed a rebellious independence, demonstrated most noticeably in her social life. The iconography of the flapper film is also that of the literary It Girl; it centers on "modern styles of dress and decor, jazz parties and nightlife, dancing, drinking, smoking, and the erotic possibilities of everyday life" (Landay 224). In both film and literature, plots featuring It Girls center around her "pursuit of modern life—independent from parental and other authoritarian control—and a modern romance in

---

<sup>6</sup> The film was based on the novella of the same name by Elinor Glyn, whose 1919 contract with Hearst's International Magazine Company included a clause for motion picture rights—another example of the growing commercial link between literature and film.

which her defiant actions, unruly behavior, and daring dress are either obstacles or catalysts or both” (224). Meanwhile, real-life It Girls like Clara Bow were “simultaneously... dynamic and troubling symbol[s] of the New Woman of the 1920s” (Orgeron 76). Though the It Girl might be a mostly fictional phenomenon, her influence on everyday women was both felt and feared.

### *Literary Perspectives*

Despite the boldness and agency for which she is known, the It Girl in film is often objectified; her looks and clothes receive more attention than her individuality or interiority. This makes the literary narratives told from the perspective of It Girls especially valuable. Such narratives stand in contrast to the majority of literary representations, in which the It Girl is viewed from a male perspective. Though usually rendered more complex here than in film, these treatments were also problematic. The It Girl became a favorite character for male writers beginning around the turn of the twentieth century, when changing gender and sexual conventions meant more freedom for women, but also more scrutiny. These single women threatened as much as they attracted, and as such, found themselves the target of satire, a frequent modernist mode. Satiric treatments range from the darkly comic (Evelyn Waugh’s *Bright Young Things*) to the biting (Aldous Huxley’s “man-eating” Lucy Tantomount), to the downright lethal, as in the eponymous femme fatale of Max Beerbohm’s *Zuleika Dobson*. Not every treatment is satiric, of course, but when these sexual free agents are not prompting the deaths of Oxford’s entire undergraduate class, they are often the subject of tragedy or censure: Hemingway’s Lady Brett Ashley can’t sleep her way out of existential ennui; Arlen’s Iris Storm masks personal tragedy with glamour; Fitzgerald’s Rosemary Hoyt provokes the protagonist’s dissolution and despair.

The spinster has a longer, though less glamorous, literary history. One finds her fairy tale equivalent in the crone or the witch, a character often antagonistic to the younger hero or heroine, but undeniably powerful. By the nineteenth century, those powers had been nearly totally diminished, and she became a stock character of pity, comic relief, or, occasionally, horror. Dickens' Miss Havisham is one of literature's most iconic spinsters—a macabre caricature of failed womanhood, ditched at the alter and forever languishing in her rotting wedding gown. Part of what makes Miss Havisham grotesque in the eyes of society is not just her foiled ambitions, but the conflation of her advanced age and that symbolic marker of nubility, the wedding dress—a fact which speaks to deeply-rooted prejudices against aging women. Jane Austen's Miss Bates, a kind and harmless, if silly, woman, receives a more sympathetic treatment, perhaps in part because Austen wishes to make Emma's joke at her expense more censurable. An irony is that while Emma feels remorse for her mockery—and indeed, the moment provides a turning point in her character's reform—Austen has been making a joke out of Miss Bates all along, for her unchecked prattle provides some of the funniest scenes in the novel. The spinster hardly fared better in the early twentieth century: E.M. Foster gives us the embittered Charlotte Bartlett in *Room With a View* (1908), and D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920) offers the hysterical Hermione Roddice<sup>7</sup>—her “terrible void” unfilled by her intellectual pursuits. Whether she be grotesque, pathetic, or risible, the typical literary spinster warns against the dangers of unmarried life.

These authors, as harsh as they might seem by today's standards, were hardly doing more than reflecting the general perspective of their day. When it came to young women in the 1920s

---

<sup>7</sup> Lady Ottoline Morrell, the historical inspiration for several satiric portraits by modernist authors, was not a spinster, but she was a sexual free agent, openly keeping lovers throughout her marriage to Phillip Morrell (Roiphe 190).

to 1950s, moral conservatism still ruled. As Nicola Beaman writes in *A Very Great Profession*, despite cultural evidence of freer sexual politics, by the 1920s “the old-fashioned morality was still widely prevalent in the homes of the great majority. A woman learnt to temper her sensuality with discretion and moderation—otherwise the fabric of society would disintegrate” (Beaman 129). After all, “the old morality [still] declared that sexual male was potent and manly but a sexual woman was a nymphomaniac” (ibid.). When considering the spinster, it seems likely that much of the public accepted the negative connotation without stopping to think why it existed; to consider being old, unmarried, and female as anything but an obvious social disadvantage would have required a radical shift in consciousness.<sup>8</sup> As Joannou remarks, “today we see the category of the frustrated spinster as a fabrication, a severely limited, deficient work of definition, but in the 1920s it passed for truth” (88). In a survey of attitudes toward the spinster in novels from 1800 to 1945, Dorothy Yost Deegan found that “almost without exception [spinsters] are old and drab and unattractive...there is little or no adventure in their lives. They have achieved nothing beyond their mere existence and show no ambition to improve or escape their lot in life” (119).

Yet there is a parallel, if less visible, tradition in the first half of the twentieth century in which novels of the single woman, far from warning against nonconformity, defended and even celebrated it. In the 1920s, the flapper and “sex novels” like those by Elinor Glyn featured contemporary confident single heroines and openly discussed female sexuality and sexual experience (Melman 103-104). As for spinsters, the idea that an unmarried woman must want a husband is refuted in novels such as *Joanna Godden* by Sheila Kaye Smith (1921), *The Crowded*

---

<sup>8</sup> The uncritical negative stereotyping of the spinster continues to this day, with decks of the children’s card game “Old Maid” still widely available for purchase. Whoever is left holding the “Old Maid” (usually prim, hook-nosed, and bonneted) at the end of the game is the loser.

*Street* by Winifred Holtby (1924), *The Unlit Lamp* by Radclyffe Hall (1924), and *Miss Mole* by E.H. Young (1930). Within this parallel tradition are a handful of women who not only reject the stereotypical presentations of the It Girl and the Spinster but do so with a subversive, at times radical, use of humor. The authors in “It Girls and Old Maids” all demonstrate the unique potential of satiric wit when they take these social types as their narrative focus and lens.

First, these characters compound the challenge to social paradigms already posed by their single status by frequently refusing to play to type: they reject, outwardly or narratively, the stereotypical view of them. Often, they take on the very divide between It Girls and spinsters itself, one never definitively fixed in years (in the early twentieth century it seemed to be somewhere around age thirty), but imaginatively immense. This blurring is especially significant because of the modernist preoccupation with youth and all that it symbolized. Images of Britain’s “flaming youth” and “Bright Young Things” dominated the interwar cultural landscape, and the rupture created by the First World War intensified the apparent gulf between the generations. As Paula Fass writes, “[the] young had come to represent the unhinging of the social order, and the journals of the twenties were filled with an image of youth out of control, of energy released from social restraints, and of raw forces unleashed” (20). She further explains that “[t]hose energies, which had once been drawn into socially necessary channels” like child-rearing and other domestic work “appeared now to threaten social order as adult enterprises were delayed and leisure time expanded. [...] Not surprisingly, traditionalists equated the unharnessed energies of youth with license, and sexual license above all” (21). Of course, “youth out of control” primarily meant *women* out of control; young men had been taking sexual license for centuries with no corresponding social outcry. Yet the alleged chasm between generations made it easier to either censure women as misbehaving children or dismiss them as outmoded,

extraneous spinsters. Characters such as Miss Pettigrew, Lolly Willowses, or Sally Jay Gorce—the latter a free spirit who is mistaken for both a “tart” and a “librarian” (59)—show these divides to be artificial. The novels in “It Girls and Old Maids” offer single women, both young and old, who challenge the limitations of society’s labels.

### **Funny Money: Humor, Gender, and the Middlebrow**

The category of the middlebrow is an expansive one, as demonstrated by the stylistic and tonal variety of the writers considered here. Nicola Humble observes that “one of the most notable things about the operation of the concept of the middlebrow in relation to the literature of the first half of the twentieth century, is just how fluid it is—and always was” (“Sitting” 42). Different critics emphasize different aspects when deciding which literature fits the category. While John Guillory defines the middlebrow broadly as “the ambivalent mediation of high culture within the field of the mass cultural,” Faye Hammill situates middlebrow literature more concretely in book history as “refer[ring] to a set of institutions and initiatives, including book clubs, extension courses, circulating libraries, lists of ‘great books,’ radio book programs, and ‘outline’ books (or accessible introductions to subjects such as philosophy or history), which aimed to make high culture available to a broad public” (20). In contrast, Nicola Humble emphasizes reading practices, saying

books are “highbrow” if read at a desk, pencil in hand, and middlebrow if read while “lolling in a chair or lying on the sofa, or in the train.” The battle of the brows can, on one level, be seen simply as a matter of sitting forward or sitting back... The more serious point that arises from this contention is that the distinction between high and middlebrow is primarily one of context rather than content, a context created by the gradual separation

in this period of two modes of reading: the professional and the leisured. (“Sitting” 47-48)

These definitions are not mutually exclusive, but I follow Humble in emphasizing audience and reading practices in my approach to the middlebrow. For the authors in “It Girls and Old Maids,” negotiation with their audience was key to the success of their critique.

While high modernists’ commitment to literary experimentation alienated many readers, the middlebrow authors of “It Girls and Old Maids” welcomed them with forms that offered both the comforts of the old and the excitement of the new. Similarly, their engagement with gender and sexual politics balanced challenge with conciliation, offering new models of femininity and sexuality that felt accessible to women not ready to shun domesticity or tradition entirely.

Furthermore, authors such as Barbara Pym and Elaine Dundy engage narrative techniques such as self-deprecation to forge a connection with their audience that encourages greater receptivity for both their critiques and their new models of psychological resistance. While scholars such as Lauren Berlant have written off the middlebrow, saying that it promoted gender conventionality as a means of easing cultural anxiety (4), close attention to acts of both formal and cultural negotiation by writers such as Barbara Pym, Anita Loos, and Winifred Watson prove that one can recognize disruptive narrative performances of gender and sexuality in the middlebrow without falling victim to feminist over-reading.

In part because of their skillful negotiation in both content and form, these novels appealed to a wide audience, a fact which makes their subversive elements all the more significant. The original popularity of Loos, West, and Pym should come as no surprise, as these authors are still well-known figures, but Sylvia Townsend Warner’s *Lolly Willowes* and Winifred Watson’s *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* also sold extremely well in both the United States and

Britain. Nine editions of Warner's novel are listed in the British Library Catalogue, and Watson's was translated into French soon after publication, and the movie rights purchased by Universal in 1939 (though it was not produced until 2008<sup>9</sup>) (Macdonald 216; Hammill, *Sophistication* 148). Elaine Dundy's *The Dud Avocado*, despite only recently coming back into print, was a best-seller when it came out and was republished with each of Dundy's subsequent books (Dundy, Afterword 257). Nearly all of the texts were critically well-received upon publication, yet none of the authors here have been fully accepted into the modernist canon (though more extensive critical work on Rebecca West and Anita Loos have recently secured them liminal positions). These novels' popularity worked against them in this regard. John Carey goes as far as to make the argument that modernism itself arose from the tensions between the mainstream and the intellectual elite, saying that "modernist literature and art can be seen as a hostile reaction to the unprecedentedly large reading public created by late-nineteenth-century educational reforms," a way "to exclude these newly educated (or 'semi-educated') readers, and so preserve the intellectual's seclusion from the 'mass'" (vii). Such a view risks being too dismissive of the achievements of high modernism, but helps to explain the undeniable tensions between the popular and the canonized.

Historically, scholarly and intellectual tension also arose from popular literature's association with women, as both consumers and producers. To begin with, there was the association of mass culture—a force always in tension with artistic and intellectual production—with the feminine. Rita Felski examines the shift that occurred at the turn of the century, when "the commodification of the household" contributed to a "feminization" of modernity which was "largely synonymous with its demonization" (61-2). She explains that "in the writings of many

---

<sup>9</sup> The renewed attention and appreciation for Watson's text is thanks in large part to a 2008 reissue by Persephone Books, a publishing house devoted to reprinting neglected works by female authors.

radical and conservative intellectuals from the mid-nineteenth century onward, the idea of the modern becomes aligned with a pessimistic vision of an unpredictable yet curiously passive femininity seduced by the glittering phantasmagoria of an emerging consumer culture” (62). An intellectually undiscerning consumer culture became something for male authors (and some outlying female ones<sup>10</sup>) to define themselves against. As Andreas Huyssen argues, “modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture” (vii). The combination of popularity and assumed female readership and themes made the authors of “It Girls and Old Maids” easy to disparage by a literary elite already anxious about their own intellectual and cultural status.

Yet middlebrow women writers were impossible to ignore. Nicola Beauman describes the years between the wars as “a heyday of fiction written by women,” citing both novel writing’s newfound respectability<sup>11</sup> and the space left by the young male writers who had died in the war (6). Swells in women writers had always been met with wariness. George Eliot expressed dismay in her essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” (1856) at the proliferation of female-authored novels which mixed (disastrously, to her mind) intellectual pretensions with conventional—and unrealistic—romantic plots, complaining that “the most mischievous form of feminine silliness is the literary form, because it tends to confirm the popular prejudice against the more solid education of women” (195). While Eliot’s concerns are understandable in the context of the nineteenth century, later reactions against popular women’s writing were less about concern for women’s intellectual advancement than reflective of

---

<sup>10</sup> The most famous outlier is Virginia Woolf, who disparaged the middlebrow as “the man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige” (“Middlebrow” 116).

<sup>11</sup> Despite the success of female novelists in the nineteenth century, many at the time felt that a career in writing took women away from domestic and family duties (Beauman 6).

misogyny exacerbated by the shifting cultural terrain of modernity. As women became a dominant force in both production and readership, many men felt the need to differentiate themselves as both readers and writers, lest they be associated with feminine, and in their minds, frivolous pursuits. As George Orwell wrote in 1940, “It is not true that men don't read novels, but it is true that there are whole branches of fiction that they avoid. Roughly speaking, what one might call the *average* novel—the ordinary, good-bad, Galsworthy-and-water stuff which is the norm of the English novel—seems to exist only for women.” This was not true, of course. Faye Hammill notes that middlebrow (or what Orwell calls “ordinary, good-bad”) literature has always included male authors and readers, though it “has persistently been gendered as feminine, with a belittling and exclusionary intention” (6).

Contributing to men's hostile reaction was the very real commercial solubility of these “ordinary” novels by women. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point to the proliferation of successful female authors after the turn of the century, and the male anxiety that rise provoked, citing examples of stories by authors such as Max Beerbohm and Aldous Huxley in which the authors' satire of women novelists conveys real anxiety (146).<sup>12</sup> Of course, not every middlebrow novel deserves equal critical attention. George Eliot, at the end of her essay, makes the important note that “silly novelists” aside, women can write some of the best fiction: “Like crystalline masses, it may take any form, and yet be beautiful; we have only to pour in the right elements—genuine observation, humor, and passion” (204). Not every middlebrow novel included all those elements, or even some of them. But what disparagers of the middlebrow overlook is that many of these novels did include genuine observation and humor and thus were worthy of critical attention, despite their more traditional forms.

---

<sup>12</sup> See “The Farcical History of Richard Greenow,” by Huxley, in which a male intellectual finds himself possessed by an increasingly aggressive female novelist, and “The Crime,” by Beerbohm, which opens with the protagonist burning the novel of a more-successful female novelist.

When women incorporated humor, they challenged norms arguably more effectively than the most experimental modernist. As Catherine Keyser points out, “[a]lthough humor provides methods of concealment and disguise, humor and its frequent comrade, irony, also derive power from revelation, from the conceptual and critical potential of unmasking” (3). An author’s use of humor and irony could expose hypocrisy in gender roles and sexual double standards even while partially concealing these observations in a light-hearted domestic novel or fanciful romance. Citing Ross Chambers, Keyser continues that such writers use humor that “acknowledges the mediating system . . . [and] endeavors to use that system, with all the play the system allows, to produce different ends, that is, to change the products of the system” (3). Far from ordinary, novels like *Miss Pettigrew*, *Lolly Willowes*, and *Excellent Women* worked stealthily against the status quo, and they did so while making their readers laugh.

However, a woman writer’s use of humor only further endangered her literary reputation. Though many male modernists employed a range of humorous techniques without harm to their reputations, women could not be as uninhibited without cost. Edna St. Vincent Millay, who wrote comic and often scathingly satirical sketches, was careful to only publish that work under a pseudonym; despite these sketches’ commercial success, she feared they would damage her literary reputation (Walker 4). As Margaret Stetz observes, women writers of comedy from the eighteenth century onward

have created situations that will make their readers laugh, while also demonstrating, through their fictional characters’ conduct, that they know it is wrong (or at least considered so) for women to indulge in making jokes or in showing that they find something funny. Even well into the twentieth century, women authors have had better

luck in overcoming the old taboos of female chastity and modesty than the prohibitions against having women characters openly indulge in a sense of humor. (ix)

The risk these writers took in incorporating humor was, in retrospect, justified. Not only was it a major factor in the popularity and success of the books considered in this dissertation—a key player in the “textual pleasure” Humble insists we take into account (*Feminine* 5)—but it was integral to their subversive potential.

With the exception of Keyser, who focuses her study on American celebrity authors, the role of humor has been largely ignored by scholars of the middlebrow. Erica Brown’s *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel: Elizabeth Armin and Elizabeth Taylor* (2015), is a notable exception, and provides a thoughtful corrective to the historic dismissal of Armin and Taylor as merely producers “delightful entertainment” (1). Yet, as Brown rightly notes, these writers’ novels are actually “remarkably dark” (2) and “painful” (4), at times synthesizing comedic elements with those of horror, and thus take a very different approach to the narratives in “It Girls and Old Maids.” Despite more attention to overtly humorous authors such as Dorothy Parker or Stella Gibbons,<sup>13</sup> more work is needed on the way that women’s humor, whether overt or ancillary, both deepens and complicates an understanding of the feminine middlebrow. Bringing humor explicitly into the conversation not only strengthens our understanding of the cultural significance of these texts, but illuminates their intersection with feminism, and the complex ways women navigated a shifting cultural landscape. After all, the terrain between the poles of conformity and overt feminist activism is wide and varied, and women found a multitude of ways to both accommodate and to challenge gender and sexual norms. Investigating

---

<sup>13</sup> For Parker and the middlebrow, see Keyser (2010); for Gibbons, see Humble (2001) and Hammill (2009).

the role of humor in the feminine middlebrow produces a better understanding of that terrain in both its ambivalence and its often surprising feminist potential.

### **It Girls, Spinsters, and Satiric Humor**

“Satiric wit,” though the dominant mode of humor in these novels, is not the only one, nor can the term rest without a critical exploration of what exactly it signifies. Part of the work of “It Girls and Old Maids” is to engage theories of humor and their intersection with the satiric, yet humor itself is a term so broad and subjective that every attempt at definition gives rise to corresponding exceptions. In the most general sense, humor is inherently social; it relies to a degree upon a shared community of knowledge and values, but has also always been used to challenge and critique those values.<sup>14</sup> Keyser cites anthropologist Mary Douglas, who proposes that “the humorist disarranges the tidy categories of hierarchy and binary; the joker ‘is one of those people who pass beyond the bounds of reason and society and give glimpses of a truth which escapes through the mesh of structured concepts’” (5-6). Descriptions such as these present humor as a means of deconstruction in service (even if indirectly) of truth, but there is a temptation, when speaking in these terms, to see it only as a positive social force. However, the “truth” Douglas references can be as much about our own aggressions, biases, and fears as anything else, as any sexist, xenophobic, or even scatological joke will show. Jokes allow us to say what we otherwise could not; Freud proposed that part of a joke’s pleasure is in allowing the bypassing of internal and external censors when we express otherwise dangerous feelings of hostility, aggression, cynicism, or sexuality (118).

---

<sup>14</sup> See Bergson (1963), Freud (1960), and Veatch (1998).

Whatever form it takes, few would deny that humor is powerful, often disruptively so.<sup>15</sup> A joke, Simon Critchley explains, changes the situation: “a true joke...suddenly and explosively lets us see the familiar defamiliarized, the ordinary made extraordinary and the real rendered surreal” (10). Yet just as humor can wake us up, it can also serve as a cultural narcotic: jokes can desensitize, and invite complacency in matters both serious and urgent. Despite these caveats, there are times when humor can act as a revolutionizing force, such as when it provides a mode of critique and resistance to those on the margins or challenges hegemonic power. Literary humor has a long history of providing that kind of resistance, most notably in the realm of satire, a tradition as old as literature itself.<sup>16</sup>

Satire, through exaggeration or ironic commentary, exposes human flaws and follies, whether individual or collective. Its forms and styles are various; what unites satire is its indirect critique. Leonard Feinberg explains, “Like the fable and allegory, satire almost always pretends to be something other than what it really is” (3). Some of the most famous satires offer the best examples: Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* has been offered for over two and a half centuries as children’s literature (Smedman 75), and many adults remember lines and characters from Orwell’s *Animal Farm* far better than the Russian political history it satirizes. Connery and Combe attribute this to the fact that satire “promises to tell us what we do not want to know—what we may, in fact, resist knowing” (1). Often exposing flaws in deeply ingrained habits, systems, and structures, “one is apt to find one’s former consciousness uninhabitable when the work of the satirist is done” (ibid.). Yet despite its artifice and subterfuge, ultimately, “satire is

---

<sup>15</sup> Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai note how “new normative constraints” over racial and sexual politics means that much of what used to be accepted comedic territory is under new scrutiny: in other words, “comedy is freshly dangerous” (235).

<sup>16</sup> Horace and Juvenal are the most famous of ancient satirists, but *The Satire of Trades*, an Ancient Egyptian satire, dates from around 2000 BCE.

concerned with the nature of reality. Unlike other arts, which emphasize what *is* real, satire emphasizes what *seems* to be real but is not. It ridicules man's naïve acceptance of individuals and institutions at face value" (Feinberg 3). As such, it has a unique potential to destabilize.

Feinberg's definition raises the question of how to differentiate satire from irony, what Laura Frost calls "modernism's signature rhetoric" (230), and an occasional mode of authors such as Loos and Pym. Satire and irony overlap to the degree that they can sometimes be used synonymously (Greenberg, *Cambridge* 30), yet there are important differences. Irony, as Lara Cox observes, is "[b]road and notoriously difficult to pin down," but is "best defined in contradistinction to what it isn't: direct, literal expression" (964). Even more helpful is Linda Hutchinson's definition, which identifies irony as "a mode of discourse where you say something you don't actually mean and expect people to understand not only what you actually do mean but also your attitude toward it" (qtd. in Cox 964). Naturally, this describes satire as well, but unlike irony, which may be applied toward a variety of ends, satire tends to relate to broader social issues and has the aim of raising awareness or indignation (Greenberg, *Cambridge* 31). In other words, irony may be used to satiric ends, but it is not satire in itself.

Helpful in parsing satire's power, and in understanding why it holds such particular potential for women, is Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque. Writing that engages the carnivalesque depicts—as in traditional forms of carnival—the de-stabilization or reversal of power structures, albeit temporarily. Patriarchal power is one of the oldest of those power structures. However, by nature of their social position, women have not had the liberty to engage in satire to the extent that men have. Women simply did not have the social license to engage in the "demolition projects" (Connery and Combe 1) that are satire's specialty. Women's satiric humor must—if it is to gain any social traction—be more subtle, more conciliatory. Judy Little

writes that traditionally, a woman writer had to “humor” the sentence in order to adapt it to “a culture and language very largely designed and dominated by her father, her husband, or her sons and brothers. She humored the sentence; that is, she had to get along with it, be nice to it” (19). In doing this, Little continues, “women have also humored the sentence in another way—they have carnivalized it. Those women writers who have a sense of a woman’s peripheral yet invested position within a male-dominated culture have given their sentences the license of carnival, a license to overturn, to mimic, and to ‘deconstruct’” (ibid.). The aim of women’s satiric humor is, like much of men’s canonical satire, to critique and to raise their reader’s awareness of injustice, but the means must be more subversive; it must work within an established order to accomplish its ends.

Therefore, I use the terms “satiric humor” and “satiric wit” to describe the efforts of the authors in “It Girls and Old Maids” in order to acknowledge those sometimes indirect means, and to signal critique without suggesting that the text as a whole should be considered a satire. As Greenberg writes, “to appreciate the full range of satiric literature, we need to consider satire not as a *genre* but a *mode*” (*Cambridge* 10, emphasis in original), yet the cultural influence of generic satire (from Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* to *The Colbert Report*) often leads to all-or-nothing categorizations. Satiric wit—the more subtle of the two types—appears in texts whose dominant modes are realist—in the psychological hall of mirrors of West’s *Return of the Solider*, for example, or tucked into Pym’s domestic drama. Satiric humor, the more overtly funny, runs through Watson’s frothy romance and Dundy’s picaresque adventure. Both are distinct from parody, for though authors like Loos or West might, in moments, echo a high modernist technique, their goal is not to humorously “represent other texts or artworks,” as is the aim of parody; like all the authors in “It Girls and Old Maids,” they are primarily original rather than

imitative in both form and content.<sup>17</sup> Finally, both “satiric humor” and “satiric wit” convey the impulse toward levity that the texts I consider share. Simply put, satire is not always funny; Dryden’s satiric verse may be scathing in its critique without ever making readers laugh. In contrast, for the novels considered here, a response of pleasure from the reader (whether in the form of a knowing smile or outright laugh) is part of the point.

Levity also contributes to these novels’ popularity, a fact which is significant in considering their relation to culture and the reading public. That public—the text’s audience—is key, for as Henri Bergson explained in his influential treatise on laughter, “to understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one... Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a *social* signification” (*Le Rire* 381). Comedy, he explains, is “in need of an echo” of others finding it funny, even if those others are imaginary. The imagined community of sympathetic readers is essential to the novels’ successful use of satiric humor. As Barreca notes, “Comedy, out of all the textual territories explored, is the least universal. It is rigidly mapped and marked by subjectivity. Almost every detail of our lives affects the way we create and respond to humor; age, race, ethnic background, and class are all significant factors in the production and reception of humor” (*Untamed* 12). This is why women have, for so long, been accused of being neither funny nor able to take a joke, when in reality they were simply not making—or laughing at—jokes designed for men and patriarchal culture at large. Thus I take audience consciously into my account of how the novels in “It Girls and Old Maids” operate. I do not suggest that the novels can only be appreciated by readers demographically similar to their authors, or that the reaction among their target audience would

---

<sup>17</sup> This is not to suggest that the two work in opposition; like irony, parody can serve a satiric function, though it is not satire in itself; Greenberg explains that “parody is often cited as a ‘technique’ of satire” (*Cambridge* 33).

be uniform. However, these novels should be understood as having a special resonance for white, female readers of the middle to upper-middle class—the typical reader of the middlebrow novel. Yet as much as demographics play a pragmatic role in audience, within—and sometimes defying—these broader categories is the more idiosyncratic and subjective community consisting of anyone for whom the humor is particularly legible. As Berlant and Ngai note, “[c]omedy helps us test or figure out what it means to say ‘us’”(235). The novels’ humorous critiques depend on understanding them as social spaces, ones not unlike the parties the *It Girl* frequents, in which “writer and reader [are] host and guest” and “intra- and extra-textual relations [are] social discourses” (McLaughlin 7). Recognizing this interplay illuminates new satiric and feminist possibilities.

For one thing, the satiric humor in these novels encourages readers to explore thoughts and feelings that would otherwise be impermissible, what Alison Jaggar calls “outlaw emotions” (166). Part of the reason humor has been traditionally seen as a man’s game is that it nearly always relies on transgression,<sup>18</sup> something for which women have historically had little to no social license. Often this transgression takes the form of aggression (seen in everything from slapstick to satire), and aggression was one of the least desirable or acceptable qualities for a woman in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> Yet one of the findings of “*It Girls and Old Maids*” is that feminist satiric humor *does* transgress, but it does so differently than the authors’ male contemporaries. Authors such as Warner, Watson, Loos and Dundy offer narrators who express justified feelings of anger (usually toward men), but their renderings of this anger are tempered by levity. The wit of these renderings is not at the characters’ expense—in fact, one of the ways these authors differ most markedly from male satirists is their sympathy toward their

---

<sup>18</sup> One need only look at a children’s joke collection to see how flat most “appropriate” jokes fall on adult ears.

<sup>19</sup> Many would argue it remains so today.

fictional protagonists. Instead, the humor serves to make the outlaw emotion less of a social threat, thus giving readers permission to explore their own—possibly unexamined—feelings of injustice, frustration, and even rage.

Feminist satiric humor also provides an avenue for women to question and challenge limiting sexual conventions. Barreca notes how even well into the late twentieth century, for a woman to even laugh at a man's sexual innuendo—let alone make the joke herself—showed her to have a sexual knowledge “good girls” shouldn't have: “The girl couldn't laugh, because Good Girls just didn't ‘get it’—‘it’ being, almost inevitably, the not-so-hidden sexual meaning in male humor” (*Snow White* 27). Obviously, Barreca's point that Good Girls don't “get it” applies to sex itself as well as the joke, for the good girl was nothing if not chaste. But It Girls do, of course, *get it*, in both senses of the phrase. It is no surprise, then, that a focus of satiric critique within many of the It Girls' tales are rigid sexual expectations for women and glaring double standards. In spinster narratives, the humor sometimes results from a sheltered spinster encountering sex—take Miss Pettigrew's blush at her young friend in an amorous embrace—or the winking transgression of a self-avowed “spinster” novelist like Pym (*Private* 67) naming her protagonist's love interest Everard Bone. However, the spinsters in these stories often show that when given the chance, they are as free-thinking, or more so, than their experienced counterparts (Miss Pettigrew later reflects that too “good” of a man doesn't stand a chance of winning over a woman, because “we women just can't help ourselves. When it comes to love we're born adventurers” [29]). Though the novels take different approaches toward sexuality, what unites these authors and differentiates them from their male contemporaries is that they take a simultaneously skeptical and affirming position towards erotic life. Among male modernists, there was a stark divide between the celebration of sexual desire in authors such as D.H.

Lawrence and the cynicism of T.S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley, and their ilk. In contrast, the authors of “It Girls and Old Maids” satirically critique the injustices and double standards within the sexual politics of their times while also upholding the erotic life as one of personal potential.

As the previous examples suggest, the nature of these authors’ critiques relates directly to the social types of their protagonists. The It Girl of the novels I consider might use her wit and charm for social positioning, power, or personal gain, or her she might fail gloriously at these attempts, but in the meantime offer readers an intimate, often critical perspective on the social scene. This scene often takes the form of parties, a motif significant in itself. The parties between and just after the wars were microcosms of broader social changes. Kate McLaughlin writes that the modernist party is “a forum for testing the relationship of the individual to other people, exploring the nature of the self and critiquing the state” (2). The ostensible frivolity of the party masks complex dynamics of gender, class, race, age, and every intersection thereof—dynamics which the It Girl engages through her wit, whether it be in dialogue or unspoken observations. In doing so, she challenges any view of her as superficial or merely decorative, though the men whom she engages are not always likewise challenged in their perception. Though other characters in the novel might remain oblivious to her mocking thoughts or even to her overt moments of verbal one-upmanship, this only strengthens the affinity between reader and character. In other cases, such as Loos’ Lorelei Lee, the young woman herself may outwardly conform to stereotypical expectations, but the text’s satirical narrative elements expose a more complex and feminist agenda.

The spinster, rather than being in the midst of the social fray, often stands just outside of it, and her outsider position offers a privileged vantage point from which to observe or challenge. Consider Mademoiselle Reisz from Kate Chopin’s 1898 feminist classic *The Awakening*.

Unmarried and devoting herself instead to her passion of music, she alone is the one who can help the unfulfilled Edna imagine an alternative path to her married life, despite being viewed as ill-tempered, anti-social and “quite demented” (68) by the men who would urge Edna away from her influence. The spinsters in “It Girls and Old Maids” also fail to conform to expectation, and while their actions may not be as overtly colorful as the socialite’s, they stand in stark contrast to the image of the spinster as a meek maiden aunt hidden behind darning needles. For instance, Loos’ Dorothy, who plays a spinster role in the novel as Lorelei’s chaperone, gets the novel’s funniest lines, for her permanent unmarried status frees her to engage in unladylike critique. Unlike representations in the majority of literature, the spinsters in these novels are shown not to be a source of pity, but of potential—both characterologically and readerly—and the humor in the texts is a key means to those ends.

At times the satirical humor comes in the form of a character who exaggerates an outdated perspective, as does Pym’s self-satisfied Mrs. Grey when she asks, “What do women *do* when they don’t marry?” (129), or the puritanical Henry Spoffard in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* who finds titillation under the guise of “senshuring” photoplays (which seems to necessitate watching the “riskay” parts “over and over”) (138). These characters speak for themselves, as it were, while other satirical treatments are narrative rather than characterological. In these cases, the humor often comes from the narrator’s reflections on a situation (whether in first-person point of a view or a close third), thoughts which often markedly contradict with her protagonist’s outward comportment. Dundy’s Sally Jay Gorce pretends to be listening to her patronizing older lover, but really feels her attention “wandering off.” She reflects, “It generally does at the phrase ‘mere child.’ It generally wanders off to see if it can’t find some really lurid thought that would shock the pants off the other person, if only he knew” (41). In some cases, the satiric humor

serves a dual role of critique and palliation, as when Pym's narrator insists so often and so diffidently on her own spinster status (such as to excuse her lack of knowledge or dowdy appearance) that it throws doubt on the sincerity of her self-deprecation. At other times, satiric wit works to alert the reader to subversive elements that may otherwise have gone unnoticed. West's spinster narrator's off-hand comment about her cousin "looking so like a girl on a magazine cover that one expected to find a '7d' somewhere attached to her person" (4) alerts readers to a significant though subtle critique of stereotypical feminine preoccupations.

In the critical work on spinsters and single women in Britain and America in the first half of the twentieth century,<sup>20</sup> none specifically addresses the role humor plays in their writing. Yet "It Girls and Old Maids" shows that it is through satiric wit that the traditional conception of "spinster" is impugned, stripped of its disparaging pathos and connotations of powerlessness. Similarly, the It Girl is shown to be not just a sex object born of the male imagination, but a young woman with agency and voice.

## Chapter Overview

Each chapter takes two primary texts from which to consider the single woman and satiric humor and wit. The first focuses on two very different novels—one a complex meditation on love, memory, and trauma, the other a screwball comedy—but suggests similar implications in the interactions between author and audience. Chapter One, "Romantic Satire in Rebecca West's *Return of the Soldier* and Anita Loos' *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*," argues that considering West's and Loos' public identities, as well as the larger context of their other literary

---

<sup>20</sup> See Deegan (1951), Doan (1991), Jeffries (1985), and Rosenthal (2002).

works, clarifies satiric impulses in their novels and situates the novels more firmly as feminist texts.

West's novel has rarely been considered in this category, with its themes of war, trauma, and truth-versus-illusion receiving the most critical attention. However, as this chapter argues, consideration of West's prolific journalism, including her unique definition of the "Spinster," brings into relief satiric moments that might otherwise go unnoticed. Together these call into question the ostensible romantic nostalgia of the novel and draw attention to its spinster narrator's moments of narrative disjunction. In such a reading, Jenny Baldry emerges as not only unreliable but often satiric as she tells the story of her idolized cousin's romantic tragedy. Instead of allowing her readers to be fully drawn into the fantasy, West, through a shifting and "queering" spinster narrator, draws attention to a more subtle problem of gender dynamics: the idealization of a romantic partner that can eclipse the other's true identity and individuality. Out of West's destabilization of her narrator's work, a feminist philosophy emerges: the popular conception of romance is not a utopian ideal that must be tragically sacrificed, but a fiction that undermines true equality between the sexes and women's view of their own potential.

Relatedly, Loos' use of the diary format and Lorelei's frequent (and humorous) misspellings emphasizes the materiality and mutability of language, making readers unusually conscious of the constructed nature of the text. Loos also makes conscious allusions to her own authorial persona, aligning herself with both the airheaded Lorelei and her drolly-intelligent companion Dorothy. This authorial alignment, in connection with specific narrative strategies, invites a reading of Dorothy and Lorelei as a fictional double, who together provide an opportunity to satirize men's susceptibility to female artifice while also acting as a metaphor for the psychic division that results in a society unable to reconcile the feminine with the intellectual.

Finally, I demonstrate how this doubling aids in Loos' critique of hypocritical romantic tropes and the traditional marriage plot.

Chapter Two considers the spinster in two modern-day fairy tales. "Bewitching Freedoms: Alternate Fantasies in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* and Winifred Watson's *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*" argues for both novels being read as feminist fairy tales which rewrite some of the most assumed patriarchal premises of the tradition. Though there has been extensive work on the patriarchal and even misogynist nature of many traditional fairy tales, as well as on feminist retellings of fairy tales in the latter part of the twentieth century (such as those by Angela Carter), according to 2015's *Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* "except for some revisionist scholarship, [feminist literary criticism] seems generally unaware of the tradition [of feminist fairy tales] before the 1970s" (Jarvis), which makes work on these novels especially important.

In *Lolly Willowes*, the feminist satiric critique begins in the book's more conventional first half, which sets the tone and introduces the issues engaged more radically in the book's second half: namely, the stifling limitations that convention, family obligation, and domesticity place on women. To illustrate an imaginative escape, Warner offers Laura's transformation into a witch, and in doing so, rewrites the common fairy tale trope that casts a powerful, unattached woman as evil. Instead, Warner shows the witch to be a symbol for the only truly free identity available to women in a society that would insist they conform to a recognizable role. This also counters such readings as Jane Garrity's, who would place Laura in another socially recognizable, if less sanctioned, romantic narrative: that of the closeted lesbian. Though I agree that the text engages questions of sexuality, I argue instead that Laura's desire should be read as a radical presentation of a queer sexuality that expands beyond repressed homosexuality.

*Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* (1938) contains no supernatural elements, but it is in every way a modern-day fairy tale, a Cinderella story in which a lonely spinster finds herself transformed by her friendship with a younger nightclub singer. Sheltered, impoverished Guinevere Pettigrew and the young and glamorous Delysia LaFosse are decades apart in age and worlds apart in social circles, yet their friendship is one of mutual fondness, enjoyment, and respect. This counters not only the fairy tale tradition of animosity between older women and girls,<sup>21</sup> but the cultural insistence that such relationships must be competitive and fraught (especially if the younger woman is beautiful women and the older one unmarried) that continues to this day.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, while fairy tales (unlike some folk tales) rarely include humor as a central component, in Warner's and Watson's narratives it serves to signal what Karen Rowe calls the "secret revelations of the tale" (394) to a specific female audience. The satiric humor in both novels (including the ironic inclusion of "Satan" in *Lolly Willowes*) creates a language that is both hidden and overt, thus speaking to a wide reading public but also communicating radical possibilities for women looking for alternate visions of female identity.

Chapter Three, "Towards a New Feminist Satire: Barbara Pym's *Excellent Women* and Elaine Dundy's *The Dud Avocado*" moves into the 1950s with novels that seem at first glance to paint more traditional portraits of an It Girl and a spinster. However, closer attention to the narrative techniques of Pym and Dundy reveals more complex and subversive projects at work, ones that in fact look forward in technique to the popular feminist satire of the twenty-first century. Although Mildred and Sally Jay ostensibly reflect stereotypes around single women,

---

<sup>21</sup> When an important older female character is not villainous, as she is in classics such as Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, The Little Mermaid, she is often absent entirely, as in Beauty and the Beast, Deerskin/Catskin, and The Red Shoes, among others.

<sup>22</sup> The 2008 film of *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* changes the ending so that instead of Miss Pettigrew being happily invited to live with LaFosse and her soon-to-be husband, she is abandoned by LaFosse and Nick and has to be rescued by Joe, her own romantic interest.

Pym and Dundy engage sophisticated narrative perspectives that resist judgement. Through their narrators' self-reflection, wit, and strategic engagement with their audience, these authors take possession of and dismantle potential critique. Furthermore, Mildred and Sally Jay unsettle any typical understanding of self-deprecation as reinforcing a patriarchal view of women. In their playful engagement with their social roles, both narrators undercut the very stereotypes on which they depend.

Key to these novels' forward-looking feminist humor are narrators who refuse to define themselves either by *or against* societal standards. Pym's Mildred Lathbury finds satisfaction in her life as an "excellent woman" who spends her time reading cookbooks and volunteering at the church jumble sale. Mildred is fully aware of how she is perceived—indeed, she fixates on her spinster status to the point of caricature—yet she is not at the mercy of such perceptions. Rather, her preoccupation draws attention to the failings of a social system that patronizes and dismisses older single women, while her sardonic narrative asides prevent any reading of her as stereotypically mild-mannered and ineffectual, instead turning the critique on those who would underestimate her. In addition, Pym uses Mildred's spinster status to her narrative advantage. Used to being invisible, Mildred has a "talent for observation" (70) and can take an anthropological view on common social situations, revealing the absurdity of a society so set in its ways that the suggestion to skip tea is met with shock and horror.

Similarly, Dundy's Sally Jay undercuts any impression of herself as simply a capricious flirt with her satiric commentary—a commentary trained both on other characters and the romantic tropes with which she willingly engages. Sally Jay also strategically plays to type in flirting with the reader, creating through her wit an alliance with the audience that holds even through her more questionable exploits. These adventures are also key to Dundy's satire, for I

argue that Sally Jay should be read in the picaresque tradition, “expos[ing] as false the portraits of the valiant warriors who populate the epic and the romance” (Greenburg, *Cambridge* 187). As the rare female *picara*, or picaresque protagonist, Sally Jay shows not “valiant warriors” to be false, but romantic heroines who passively accept their given roles.

Ultimately, “It Girls and Old Maids” argues that satiric humor serves as an affective strategy for both author and character, through which women can challenge and critique sexual conventions, while still taking advantage of their genres’ popular appeal. It engages theories of humor, affect, narratology, and the middlebrow to make the case that the wit employed by these authors makes radical positions and reimaginations appealing for a wide audience without diminishing their revolutionary potential.

## CHAPTER ONE

Romantic Satire in Rebecca West's *Return of the Solider* and Anita Loos'*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes***Introduction**

The first novels of Rebecca West and Anita Loos could hardly seem more different, in both theme and style. Written on opposite sides of the Atlantic, West's slim, realist *Return of the Solider* (1918) is a complex meditation on love, memory, class, and trauma set in WWI England. The American "Diary of a Professional Lady," as Loos subtitles her *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925), offers a comedic romp that gleefully satirizes everything from New York high society to censorship to psychoanalysis. However, the novels and their authors have more in common than first appears. Both West and Loos actively worked to construct public literary personas, while also navigating a socially-authored celebrity that was often in tension with their own ideological and intellectual positions. Each challenged her era's imposed dichotomy between femininity and intellectual achievement: Loos, a Spinoza-reading *cérébrale* who appeared draped in the latest fashions in the pages of *Photoplay*; West, an ardent feminist nominated for *Vanity Fair*'s 1924 Hall of Fame "chiefly because, for all the richness of her gifts, she remains young, beautiful, brilliant, genuine and feminine" (Armory 118). Understanding West's and Loos' public identities, as well as the larger context of each author's other literary works, brings previously unrecognized satiric impulses in their novels into relief.

Both writers were prolific across a variety of mediums and genres—for Loos, film scripts and later, autobiography; for West, journalism and book reviews. In both cases, the authors' previous (and, in the case of West, contemporaneous) work informed both the contemporary reception to their novels and their own approach to their material. Yet until recently, journalism and film work, as genres of the masses, were largely dismissed in considerations of modernist

literary endeavors. That women were often active in these genres did not help their reputations. Patrick Collier observes that “the prestige of journalism as a profession was at a historic low” during the years in which West wrote, and “this crisis was, for many observers, consequent with the arrival of women as a force in journalism” (qtd. in Clay 199-200). Journalism was also the most common outlet for women’s humor (Walker 6-7), a fact which also contributed to its dismissal by the intellectual elite. When it came to film work, Richard Corliss notes that “[b]etween 1915 and 1930, the industry’s leading scenarists were[,] by large majority, women,” and until the mid-1920s, “women outnumbered men in the screen writing trade ten to one” (qtd. in Muscio 289). Yet these accomplishments were rarely recognized, as films continued to be regarded as vehicles of intoxication and “deluded reverie” rather than meaningful creative work (Frost, *Problem* 132). Furthermore, the fact that Loos worked primarily on light-hearted comedies was a further barrier to serious consideration. Though film scholars of the last few decades have traced Loos’ career with interest, Brooks Hefner observes the failure of literary critics to study it in connection with her novel, calling it a “cultural blind spot of the 1920s” (108). Considering these authors’ creative careers more holistically is a feminist endeavor in itself, important both in remedying these cultural—and gendered—blind spots, and in understanding the progressive gender politics of West’s and Loos’ novels. In the case of West, her book reviews shed light on her own literary philosophy and approach to the social types of the spinster, while her prolific, fiercely feminist and often scathingly satirical journalistic essays invite a reevaluation of her novel’s ideological position. For Loos, an early silent film treatment and later autobiographical writing encourage a reconception of her novel’s main characters, the flighty Lorelei and her witty sidekick Dorothy.

Key to both of my readings is a focus on West's and Loos' narrators, a spinster and *It Girl*, respectively. Both authors disrupted stable—and limiting—markers of identity for unmarried women in their own lives, disruptions which extend to the single women who tell their stories. Though these narrators seem at first to follow traditional tropes, both narratives contain tonal inconsistencies—moments when West's and Loos' authorial voices intrude. West's slim first novel tells the story of Christopher Baldry, who returns from the Front to his wife, Kitty, and unmarried cousin Jenny. The trauma of the war has resulted in Chris's memory loss, and he seeks out a former love, who has since remarried but still returns Christopher's love. The crisis of the novel is whether Chris will be allowed to remain in blissful ignorance, or have his memory restored—a cure that would result in his return to the Front. Truth wins out—the novel ends with Chris facing a loveless marriage and near-certain death—and thus seems to fulfill the criteria of a tragic romance, complete with an ideal love that must be sacrificed to forces beyond human control. Yet I argue that the spinster narrator's moments of satiric irony (which sound more like West herself), and the attention West draws to Jenny's unreliability come together to form a critique of that traditional romantic trope. Though she does not dwell on her narrator's spinster status, West was active in debates in *The Freewoman* over the term “spinster” and popular conceptions of unmarried women more generally, suggesting that the choice to make her narrator a spinster was a deliberate one. Her unique conception of the Spinster as a specific literary type given to romantic idealism illuminates the reasons for Jenny's unreliability and, subsequently, West's satiric agenda. Few critics have considered the gender politics of the narrative, or the significance of its narrator, yet a focus on Jenny Baldry and her narration brings the novel's feminist underpinnings into relief.

More attention has been paid recently to Loos' Lorelei Lee, the ditzy blonde who is still savvy enough to know that "kissing your hand might make you feel very good but a diamond and safire [*sic*] bracelet lasts forever" (75). *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* follows Lorelei, accompanied by sidekick Dorothy, on a tour of Europe, where she who manipulates men out of diamonds and, eventually, into marriage. Like West, Loos creates moments of narrative disjunction which call attention to the constructedness of her character, moments in which Loos' own authorial voice takes precedence. These moments alert the attuned reader to Loos' feminist critique, one which has not been fully recognized by critics. While Lori Landay does read *Blondes* as "an ironic indictment of the materialism of the Jazz Age and the economic basis of the social relations of the sexes" (*Madcaps* 83), I argue that Loos makes it clear that these relations are not unique to American culture or to the changing social dynamics of the 1920s. They are long-standing and ubiquitous; it is only the extremity of Lorelei's behavior that shocks readers out of accepting it as natural. In contrast to Lorelei, Loos offers Dorothy, who inhabits a spinster role as Lorelei's chaperone. Dorothy has a short-lived love affair unmotivated by financial incentive, but must give it up due to her position, demonstrating that even women who might try to "exit the system" and find love on other terms are still beholden to women's restrictive economic and social realities. Though most critics read the sardonic Dorothy as a stand-in for Loos herself, I argue that she deliberately aligns herself with both Dorothy *and* Lorelei, creating a doubled character who provides an opportunity to satirize men's susceptibility to female artifice, while also acting as a metaphor for the fragmentation of self that the creation of such an artifice necessitates.

In both novels, the narrators' inconsistencies and shifting registers should not be viewed as flaws, but as experimental narrative strategies that reveal a shared critical agenda: namely, a

nuanced attack on that most “feminine” of genres: the romantic fantasy. Though conceptions of romantic relationships have evolved over the centuries, certain enduring qualities persist in literary depictions of ideal love. As in the Cinderella story that forms a focal point of Chapter Two, the lovers are, like Cinderella’s shoe and tiny foot, “a perfect fit.” Few, if any, flaws in the lovers are permitted—barriers to unions are circumstantial, as in the case of Romeo and Juliet or Tristan and Isolde, rather than characterological. When a seemingly less perfect hero shows up—a Mr. Darcy or a Mr. Rochester, perhaps—they are redeemed by the novel’s end, either by a deeper understanding on the part of the heroine, or through a dramatic act of sacrifice. In nineteenth-century romantic plots, money is necessarily a key concern—Darcy’s wealth ensures a comfortable life, as well as introducing conflict in the form of romantic competition, and Elizabeth’s relative poverty is a barrier to their union—yet the fantasy gets much of its appeal from the notion that to Jane Eyre and Elizabeth Bennet, wealth is secondary: true love transcends material concerns, a truth enjoyed from the luxury of their new life of ease and elevated social position. These plots held their appeal well into the twentieth century. For instance, best-selling author Georgette Heyer, an exemplar of middlebrow romantic fiction in the 1920s and 1930s, combined “historical trappings...with the basic Jane Eyre plot of the socially underprivileged girl falling in love with the superior man who does not notice” (Beauman 177).

What West and Loos offer in their novels is a reminder that as appealing as that fantasy is, it glosses over and even perpetuates regressive gender politics. By alerting readers to Jenny’s unreliability, West asks that we focus not on Chris’s perfect love, but on Jenny’s insistence on it, and the way it distorts her understanding of both Chris and Margaret. For, as West suggests, seemingly ideal love is, more often than not, *idealizing*, preventing genuine recognition, connection and, most importantly, equality between men and women. Loos, on the other hand,

brings the material and monetary underpinnings of romance to the forefront, acknowledging through humor the blatant fact that for a woman not born into wealth, her greatest resource is her sexual charm, and satirizing both the men who underestimate her and the society which would force such transactional gender relations in the first place.

The stakes of recognizing these authors' more complex projects are significant. For West, my reading offers a fresh understanding of the novel's themes and a way to reconcile what has been read as a surprisingly conservative novel with the author's public persona as an outspoken feminist. For Loos, it provides a more nuanced reading of her stance on gender politics and the target of her satire, while also offering a deeper understanding of how her film work and public persona inform her classic novel. My arguments also speak to the importance of applying narrative and stylistic analysis to middlebrow literature, an approach often neglected even by those eager to reclaim the middlebrow for its potentially subversive qualities. Both West's and Loos' narrative strategies are more difficult to recognize because of their books' overall adherence to generic conventions, whether those conventions are realist and romantic, as in West, or comic, as in Loos. Yet both novels exemplify what John Fiske, writing in 1989, called "producerly" texts, in which the reader has a choice of whether to take a more active role in the production of meaning (99). Fiske builds on Barthes' concepts of "writerly" and "readerly" texts. The former, a category to which most which avant-guard modernist texts belong, "challenges the reader constantly to rewrite it, to make sense out of it." The more passive "readerly" text "invites an essentially passive, receptive, disciplined reader who tends to accept its meanings as already made. It is a relatively closed text, easy to read and undemanding of its reader" (Barthes qtd. in Ehland and Wächter 3). In contrast, the "producerly" text

has the accessibility of a readerly one, and can theoretically be read in that easy way by those of its readers who are comfortably accommodated within the dominant ideology [...], but it also has the openness of the writerly. The difference is that it does not require this writerly activity, nor does it set the rules to control it. Rather, it offers itself up to popular production. (Fiske 99)

As producerly texts, Loos' and West's novels, like all the novels in this dissertation, demonstrate the potential of subversive feminism within middlebrow literature for an audience prepared to be attuned to it. Taken together, my readings work toward a reconception of how women's satiric humor might challenge romantic tropes, even when that humor operates within conventional and popular genres.

### **Rebecca West's Feminism**

Few critics have identified feminist themes in *The Return of the Soldier*, let alone read it as a feminist novel—a fact all the more surprising because of the dominant role feminist activism took in West's early life and career.<sup>23</sup> At fifteen, she was selling copies of *Votes for Women* outside suffragette rallies (Rollyson 29), and by sixteen she had published her first piece of writing—a letter to the *Scotsman* of the subject of women's rights (Marcus Young 4). By eighteen, West was writing for *The Freewoman*, the feminist newspaper recently founded by suffragette activist Dora Marsden. Though West's feminism had its roots in the suffragette movement and the Women's Social and Political Union, even by her early twenties, her vision of

---

<sup>23</sup> The few exceptions take up different elements than I will consider: Marina Mackay argues that West, like Virginia Woolf, “use[s] narrative indirections to diagnose two problems of patriarchal culture: that it glorifies militaristic and materialistic models of masculinity...and that it renders women complicit in male violence” (124), and Rebecah Pulsifer tries to reconcile *Return* with West's more overt feminism by focusing on West's legitimation of female trauma.

the changes necessary for women's liberation went far beyond legal victories. According to West, feminism was "more than a fight for the vote. It was a fight to grow in art, in science, in politics, in literature: it is a fight for a place in the sun" (*Young* 3). West had been drawn to Marsden because the older woman "sought to expose the limitations of narrowly emphasizing the vote at the expense of larger questions of gender relations, sexual life, and more broadly, women's physical, spiritual, and intellectual experience of modernity" (Green 226). In this way, West looks ahead to the other authors in this dissertation, whose approach to feminism went beyond legal rights or even social roles and occupations in advocating for a broad reconceptualization of women's self-identity.

West's attacks on conventional gender expectations were fervent and colorful. In 1913, writing for the *Clarion*,<sup>24</sup> she described the current model in no uncertain terms: "If a woman's husband is rich, she must live the cloying life of a prize pedigree pig. And if she is poor she must live the life of a pit pony in a district uninspected by the RSPCA. For she is to be debarred from all activity save organization of home life" (*Young* 170). Such bracing metaphors were characteristic of West's style, but her tone could also slip into more subtle, witty, and sardonic registers. As biographer Carl Rollyson observes, "Accustomed to male condescension, Rebecca West reversed it and mimicked its superior tone" (Rollyson 34). He cites her review of Harold Owen, in which she writes, "As a Freewoman, I review his anti-feminist thesis, *Woman Adrift*, with chivalrous reluctance, feeling that a steam-engine ought not to crush a butterfly" (qtd. in *ibid.*). Satiric wit was one of the most distinctive traits of West's writing, as well as one of her most effective weapons in the fight for women's equality, a fact that should be kept in mind when considering her novel.

---

<sup>24</sup> Robert Blatchford's socialist newspaper, to which West was a frequent contributor.

West defied the status quo for women not only through her writing, but through her self-presentation and public image. Like Loos, she was initially drawn to the theater, and though neither woman continued acting past their teen years, their attraction to spectacle and performance continued to manifest itself in their prose and in the pleasure they took in crafting their public personas. Also like Loos, West challenged the convenient divide many liked to imagine between feminism and traditional presentations of desirable femininity. Portraying suffragettes as old, ugly and bitter was politically advantageous for their opponents, yet West caught the public eye, not just with her writing, but with her youth and looks. By her early twenties, West had become a literary ingenue, attracting attention from those in the know for her relationship with novelist H.G. Wells, and becoming acquainted with established literary celebrities such as Ford Madox Hueffer (as he was then known) and D.H. Lawrence, both of whom she would severely critique in her book reviews (Rollyson 48). In the years following the publication of *The Return of the Soldier*, she became a literary celebrity in her own right. Contemporary Sewell Stokes, in his collection of witty (and frequently derisive) celebrity profiles, observed that “her name is known even by people who could not tell you who she is, what she has written, or if she writes at all; which, I think, is a substantial proof of fame” (qtd. in Stetz “Sideways” 62). Stokes attributed much of her fame to the combination of her youth, looks, and theatrical personality. She could “fill even a large room on entering it, fill it as a ray of dazzling electric light or a breath of expensively scented air,” while talking to her “was like being the supporting character in a duologue by Wilde. One has to ‘play up’ to the lead all the time, and ‘playing up’ to Rebecca West is no easy matter” (ibid.). Stokes undersells her writing—West was a prolific and provocative writer even by her early twenties—but his portrait illustrates the way West’s literary and social identities were intertwined in the public

imagination, and the gendered terms of her reception by her contemporaries. Furthermore, West reinforced the convergence of literary and social identities by frequently inserting herself into her nonfiction writing, frequently writing in the first person and appearing as a narrator-character in book reviews and essays.

Considering *The Return of the Solider* in light of West's other writing and public persona brings into relief elements that have gone unnoticed. Most of the scholarship on the novel has been done in the past three decades, thanks in large part to its critical rediscovery by feminist scholars. While many of these interpretations offer persuasive and nuanced arguments, they work at a distance from West's socially and personally authored public persona, and thus miss the most Westian elements of her novel: its feminism and its theatricality. Specifically, the inconsistent performance of West's narrator calls into question her version of events, including the "ideal" romance that Chris must give up in the book's tragic conclusion. Instead, one should read the novel as a rejection of the romantic tropes that continue to perpetuate inequality between the sexes.

### **“[W]hat Is the Good of All These Spinsters?”**

To understand West's critique, one must first look to her choice of narrator. Jenny Baldry, Chris's unmarried thirty-five-year-old cousin, tells the story of the love triangle formed by Chris, Kitty, and his former love, Margaret. Jenny does not address her spinster status directly, but West's attention to the topic in her journalism speaks to the significance of her choice of narrator. As Shannon McMahon observes, "spinster" at the time of West's writing was not a stable term, but one spurring debates among social commentators, including West and her contemporaries in *The Freewoman*. Debates over the term were intimately linked to more

general popular conceptions of unmarried women at the time, and were taken up by writers at *The Freewoman* as a way of exposing the rigid limitations for women in a society which insisted upon marriage. Occurring both in published essays and reader correspondence, the writing in *The Freewoman* demonstrates “readers and contributors work[ing] alternately to dismantle and reclaim the term ‘spinster’” (61).

These conversations, which took place during West’s time at *The Freewoman* and just a few years before she started work on *The Return of the Solider*, are vital to understanding the link West and her feminist contemporaries found between traditional romantic conventions and women’s disempowerment, and, subsequently, to West’s choice of narrator. In 1911, an unidentified contributor, who McMahon identifies as editor Dora Marsden (77), published a piece entitled “The Spinster—by One,” in which she responds—alternately satirically and sincerely—to the public conception of unmarried older women. The piece opens by satirizing the public’s simultaneous fear and condescension:

I write of the High Priestess of Society. Not of the mother of sons, but of her barren sister, the withered tree, the acidulous vestal under whose pale shadow we chill and whiten, of the Spinster I write. She, unobtrusive, meek, soft-footed, silent, shamefaced, bloodless and boneless, thinned to spirit, enters the recesses of the mind, sits at the secret spring of action, and molds and fashions our emasculate Society. (10)

Marsden, using an embellished satirical style which West would also adopt, mocks both the outsized place the spinster occupied in the public imagination, as well as the attempts to denigrate her. Yet she also recognizes the very real toll that this attitude takes on unmarried women. In one of the more sincere passages, she complains of a society that raises its girls on expectations of romance, calling it “a subtle ruse on the part of a consciously inadequate society

to prepare its victims for the altar” (11). Any woman not happily sacrificed at the matrimonial altar must face the consequences of societal rejection and scorn. As Marsden writes, “The Spinster stands the racket. She pays the penalty.”

Part of that penalty is suffering the stigma of the “unhealthy” nature of a celibate life. Considering the “sex impulse” in the spinster, she satirically suggests that the Spinster does not overcome Sex as a Saint overcomes Sin. She does not, save rarely, crush out of existence that part of her which is threatening her life’s reasonable calm. Driven inward, denied its rightful ordained fulfillment, the instinct becomes diffused. The field of consciousness is charged with an all-pervasive unrest and sickness, which changes all meanings, and queers all judgments, and which, appearing outwardly, we recognize as sentimentality. (11)

Though knowledge of Marsden’s own unmarried status and decidedly unsentimental perspective suggests that we should read this satirically, she was in fact echoing common beliefs about the effects of a single life,<sup>25</sup> ones that would come into subversive play in West’s own spinster creation.

Yet first, West would formulate her own unique conception of the spinster as social and literary type, one which takes seriously the association that Marsden had made satirically between spinsters and sentimentality. In a 1912 piece for *The Freewoman* titled “Spinsters and Art,” she reviews three novels, *The Considine Luck* by H.A. Hinkson, *The Spinster* by H. Wales, and *The Trespasser* by D.H. Lawrence, all of which feature spinster characters from which West would build her revision of the term. West opens the essay by eviscerating the first novel: “The baldness and badness of popular novels,” she writes, “is as touching as the ugliness of a

---

<sup>25</sup> In fact, the piece so effectively echoed public sentiment that many readers missed the sarcasm entirely (McMahon 66).

cherished rag doll. What overflowing tenderness must be in the heart of the child who loves this monstrosity, we think. And so with the people who read these novels—what tireless imaginations they must have, to perceive joy in these bare chronicles!” We more sophisticated readers, she continues, “are too feeble to go searching for beauty on our own like that,” and must wait for authors such as Hardy and Conrad to shore us up, while “the common man...takes the puppet heroine...and paints her wooden cheeks with the flush of his sensuous dreams” (*Young* 42). The lines drip with sarcasm: the book is so bad that it would take an impressive feat of imagination to make it capable of producing an emotional effect. These lines offer insight into what, to West, constituted good literature, as well as an example of the tonal modes among which she frequently shifts—satiric humor blending into more straightforward invective (which will later contrast with fierce sincerity, only to move again into humorous critique).

The common characteristic of the spinsters in the three books is their problematic sentimentality. West’s treatment of *The Spinster* by H. Wales addresses this shortcoming, and also offers another example of the satiric wit so characteristic of her prose. She begins by calling the novel “a great work,” continuing,

I was held from the very first page, whereon I read: “There were reservoirs of love in her—of wife-love and of mother-love—accumulating reservoirs, which had never been tapped.” This is luscious imagery. “The Tapping of the Spinster” would be an exquisite title for a poetical play. And the conception of fate as a Metropolitan Water Board regulating the flow of spiritual liquids is immense. (*Young* 43)

Clearly West’s critique here is of Wales, and not of spinsters per se, but it speaks to her frustration with the way love in lesser literature is portrayed in overly simplistic terms. In works

such as these, the woman is an uncomplicated vessel, to be filled with the “liquid” stuff of love, not a complex being of character and intellect.

West then turns to Lawrence’s *The Trespasser*, which again features an idealizing romantic protagonist. Helena, a “spinster through and through” (*Young* 46), fails to understand that real love is complicated, and conflict is inherent. Problems of “circumstance” and “temperamental differences...are conditions found in almost every union,” West writes. It is Helena’s failure to appreciate that fact that creates the “gulf” between the lovers in Lawrence’s novel. She “is a sentimentalist...all fancy and no imagination” (*Young* 45). Here we come to West’s conception of the spinster, which she feels Lawrence illustrates in the character of Helena—a person whose idealized vision of their object of love obscures reality. West describes Helena as

drunk with the spinster’s ethereal conception of man. The spinster, looking out on the world through the drawn curtains of the boarding-school or the equally celibate boarding-house sees men as trees walking—large, dignified, almost majestic. Like Helena, she refuses to see their helplessness, their pathetic defeats in the strife against circumstance and temperament. She perpetually conceives of them as masters of the situation. (*Young* 46)

According to West, the spinster does not view men as complex, often flawed individuals, but only romantic icons.

Where West’s argument becomes more surprising, given her own single status and avowed feminism, is that she seems to question not just the spinster as character but spinster as author. In both cases, the spinster “has an ill-effect on literature” because of this tendency to idealize (*Young* 47). For instance, the spinster Charlotte Brontë gives us Mr. Rochester, who is

“marred by a perpetual dignity.” West calls for novels “written by women about men” who resist this temptation. (ibid.) Those unencumbered by wifehood or motherhood are most at liberty to do so, by becoming writers, but a spinster, according to West, “is usually a sentimentalist, and therefore incapable of art” (ibid.). One wonders why West, an outspoken feminist and single woman herself, would suggest that a single woman couldn’t really *know* a man in the way that a married woman could (“A married woman would not have believed in Mr. Rochester for one minute,” she writes). And indeed, readers did write in to *The Freewoman* to complain. One disappointed respondent wrote that it was “somewhat surprising to find these remarks in a modern feminist journal. They seem, rather, to belong to the Early Victorian age, when jeers at the spinster and at the mother-in-law were mistaken for wit” (“A Disappointed Reader”).

However, West clarifies in a follow-up piece in *The Freewoman* the next month:

To begin with, spinsterhood is not necessarily a feminine quality. It is simply the limitation of experience to one’s own sex, and consequently the regard of the other sex from an idealist point of view. Walter Pater and A.C. Benson are typical spinsters: Miss May Sinclair, though an unmarried woman, is not. (*Young* 48)

Her inclusion of men as potential Spinsters—which I will capitalize in order to differentiate West’s conception from its general usage—demonstrates the reach of her reappropriation of the word, and reinforces the idea that when it comes to understanding the opposite sex, both men and women can fall equally short.

In the same follow-up piece in *The Freewoman*, West continues that “The spinster is ridiculous because she is limited. (I write as a most typical spinster.)” (*Young* 48). Here was a literary It Girl who, at the ripe old age of twenty, pronounced herself a spinster, and in doing, challenged any stable—and limiting—markers of identity for unmarried women. Yet even if

West applied the term to herself in part to destabilize its usage, it is also true that in 1912, West had had no significant romantic entanglements. By her own logic, she was not yet in a position to write about a male character, and romantic love, because she had not engaged fully with love and sex herself. However, a year later she would begin her intense and prolonged affair with the novelist H.G. Wells, thus gaining the first-hand knowledge of romantic and sexual intimacy she had called for in aspiring authors. Yet four years later, she would choose to write her novel of romantic love not only from the perspective of an unmarried woman, but one with no apparent history of romantic or sexual relationships. West concludes “Spinsters and Art” with a question. If Spinsters are uniquely poised, in their freedom from typical female constraints, to be artists, but are limited in their vision of other people, “what is the good of all these spinsters?” (47). *The Return of the Solider* answers this question, in subtle and surprising ways.

### **The Spinster Narrator as Unreliable Romantic**

By creating a spinster narrator, one might expect West to fall victim to her own complaint—a story told by a character who idealizes romance without understanding the human complexity of its players. And indeed, for much of the novel, this is Jenny’s dominant mode and shortcoming. However, woven into her first-person narration are strange moments of disjunction—shifts in tone, in self-awareness, in reliability—as well as moments in which Jenny’s breaks from feminine, heteronormative convention, that challenge what might otherwise be read as a traditional romantic fantasy. Instead of allowing her readers to be fully drawn into the romance, West, through this shifting and queering, draws attention to a more subtle problem of gender dynamics: the idealization of the romantic partner that can eclipse that partner’s identity and individuality. Interestingly, it is not Chris, in this case, who actually idealizes

Margaret, but Jenny, who distorts Chris's own version of events into a more traditional—and antiquated—vision of romantic love. From West's destabilization of her narrator's work, the flaw in such a perspective is revealed, and a feminist philosophy emerges: the popular conception of romance is not a utopian ideal that must be tragically sacrificed, but a fiction that undermines true equality between the sexes and women's view of their own potential.

As the novel opens, Jenny does, indeed, idealize Christopher. She reflects with pride on the work that she and Kitty have done on the estate; though some might judge their spending as “a little disgraceful,” Jenny is “sure that [they] were preserved from the reproach of luxury” because they had made a home “good enough for [Chris'] amazing goodness” (6). Chris is so wonderful, in fact, that Jenny seems content to orient her life around him utterly; she and Kitty, she reflects, “were not...specially contemptible women, because nothing could ever become a part of [their] life until it had been referred to Chris' attention” (8). Even a visitor's calling card is dismissed because, however pretty the guest, “there was no chance Chris would come in and stand over her, his fairness red in the firelight, and show her...attention” (7-8). Such statements would be typical enough, if old-fashioned, if they came from Kitty, yet Jenny's own status as Chris's unmarried cousin means that her excessive insistence on Chris's centrality to her life strikes a discordant note.

Of course, Jenny fears for Chris's safety, a fact which might help to explain her fixation. The novel opens with WWI looming over the peaceful Harrowweald; the estate's beauty is “an affront” to Jenny because of Chris's absence. Laura Cowen writes that West reflects a common understanding of the female experience on the home front: “Women's lives were empty with loss and waiting. The men's absence is more than physical because most women's identities depended upon the men in their lives. Without the roles of mother, daughter, hostess, or

housekeeper, many women had little left" (21). Yet such an observation throws Jenny's own status into relief, for though she too is "wishing for the return of a soldier" (5), she occupies none of these male-dependent roles—as a single cousin she had no practical purpose at Harrowweald even before Chris was called to war. Thus her idolization of Christopher reads not as typical, but as the near-pathological romanticism of West's sentimental Spinster. Jenny is obsessed with a man she views more like a young god, and the image of her "sp[ying]" (7) on him from an upstairs window on his last day at home connotes West's previous image of the Spinster "looking out on the world through...drawn curtains" (*Young* 46). Thus from the first pages, West signals both Jenny's romanticism in her description of her cousin, and the remove from which she must observe him, both of which should make readers question her subsequent descriptions of his intimate life.

Christopher is one of the novel's three main characters, the pivotal corner of novel's tragic love triangle. Yet for occupying such a role, he is surprisingly sketchily drawn. Recall West's pronouncement that Spinsters see men like "trees walking...majestic" (*Young* 46), and then observe Jenny's description of Chris: "He was so wonderful when he was young, he possessed in great measure the loveliness of young men, which was like the loveliness of the spry foal or the sapling" (50). To the Spinster, men are "trees walking"; young Chris is a "sapling." Jenny does make a cursory effort to go beneath the surface, such when we learn that "when the sunlight lay on him, discerning the gold hairs on his brown head, or when he was subject to any physical pleasure there was always some reserve in his response to it" (50). Yet for all her attention to Chris' looks, and to his elevated qualities in the abstract (in his sun-dappled state, he is "distracted by some spiritual drama" (50)), readers are given little in the way of specific description that brings the young man to life, either in the novel's present, or in

memories from his and Jenny's shared past. To read as real, a character must be shown in full dimension, complete with flaws and imperfections. Jenny seems, for much of the book, to be guilty of precisely what one of Lawrence's male characters accuses the Spinster Helena of (in a passage West quotes in "Spinster and Art"): "These... women don't want *us*; they want flowers of the spirit they can gather of us. We, as natural men, are more or less degrading to them and to their love of us" (qtd. in *Young* 46). Indeed, if this kind of idealization was all Jenny did as a narrator, West's novel would indeed have failed by her own metric. However, West alerts readers to Jenny's unreliability, thus calling into question both her view of Chris and her version of events.

Take, for example, Jenny's introduction to the extended sequence in which she tells of Chris and Margaret's romance on Monkey Island, which she opens with the line, "I think it is the truth" (33). As Mieke Bal observes in *Narratology*, the "truth claim," when given by a first-person narrator, is "the best guarantee of fictionality" (27). Monkey Island emerges as the spinster's shimmering romantic vision, but West has alerted readers to its fictionality before she even begins. It is one of the few times when West draws our attention to the fact Jenny is recounting this story from a distant future. Jenny admits, "I have lived so long with the story which he told me that I cannot now remember his shy phrases" (33). Chris' actual experience will remain obscured, in favor of the story that lives inside Jenny. She continues, "this is how *I* have visualized his meeting with love on his secret island" (emphasis added). Again Jenny, not Chris, receives the emphasis of the sentence, and note the object of Chris' meeting: not Margaret, but "love"—vague, abstracted, inhuman.

The scene that follows is much more about Jenny and her romantic vision than either of the key participants. She describes the backdrop to this romance, the lawn on which Margaret

and Chris sat together, in extravagantly purple prose, yet the passage ends with jarring abruptness when the scene is invaded by one of its key players: “In liquefaction of colours which happens on a summer evening, when the green grass seemed like a precious fluid poured out on the earth and dripping over the river, and the chestnut candles were no longer proud flowers, but just wet white lights in the humid mass of the tree, when the brown earth seemed just a little denser than the water, Margaret also participated” (37-38). The passage is almost comically discordant, a resplendent fantasy landscape in which actual human interaction seems beyond Jenny’s imaginative grasp. Jenny follows her notably lackluster description of Margaret by immediately inserting herself into the narrative: “Chris explained this part of his story stumblingly, but I too have watched people I loved in the dusk and I know what he meant” (38). So she claims, but why, then, the awkward choice of “participated” to describe Margaret in this moment, one supposedly key to the development of their relationship? Jenny is more comfortable with the language of romantic scenery, or descriptions that seem plucked from a book such as Wales’, with his “accumulating reservoirs” of love. She sounds more certain when attesting that on the night Chris made his love known, “there was nothing anywhere but beauty. He carried [Margaret] in his arms and made her stand in a niche above the alter....as he spoke her warm body melted to nothingness in his arms” (41). The scene is straight out of a romance novel, and stands in stark contrast to the book’s strains of realism. Compare this description to Jenny’s early bad dreams of Chris’s time on the Front, when she envisions her cousin “running across the brown rottenness of No Man’s Land, starting back here because he trod upon a hand, not even looking there because of the awfulness of an unburied head” (5). The discrepancy between the stylistic excess in her description of Monkey Island and these blunt images of

carnage should make readers question authorial intention behind Jenny's excessively sentimental descriptions.

However, the lure of such an idyllic scene is strong, and the traditional romantic current in the novel is so pervasive that even critics aware of West's feminist ideology have misread Jenny's sentimentalism as sincere on the part of the author. Ann V. Norton claims that despite West's feminist alliances, "her novels pervasively appear to argue for traditional relationships between the genders" (Hertz 367), and this scene, in which a man literally puts a woman on a pedestal, would seem to support that reading. But even if West had not signaled her narrator's shifting registers and unreliability, she herself argued against reading fiction in isolation from an author's life and professed beliefs. As her biographer Carl Rollyson testifies, West "saw biography as a primary source of knowledge" and "objected strenuously to T.S. Eliot's attempt to expunge the writer's personality from his work" (9). West's personality is on full display in the numerous articles written in the years before, during, and after the writing of her novel. This was a woman who celebrated *The Freewoman* because it "smashed the romantic pretense that women had as a birth-right the gift of perfect adaptation; that they were in a bland state of desireless contentment which, when they were beautiful, reminded the onlooker of goddesses" (Young 6). In her nonfiction, West demands that society recognize the complex desires of women *beyond* romance, rather than put them on an "altar" like goddesses, as Jenny describes Christopher's actions toward Margaret (41).

In 1917, the same year she was writing *The Return of the Solider*, West made an argument that should put to rest any doubts on her view of the kind of romantic idealization demonstrated by her narrator. Her article for the *Daily News* entitled "Woman Worship" takes as its target the older Swedish feminist, Ellen Key. Key's brand of feminism lacked what West saw

to be essential: “an aspiration that women should contribute more largely than they have done to the development of humanity by the exercise of intelligence and genius” (*Young* 339). Instead, West writes, Kay’s feminism “has been woman-worship. Women need not trouble to develop any human qualities. They are merely to sit still and be as female as they can, taking as their ideal not the untiring St. Teresa, but the Sacred Cow of the Universe” (*ibid.*). It is impossible, in light of writing such as this, to take Chris’ worship of the “beatified” (47) Margaret uncritically. Instead, readers should look to who is doing the telling. As Bal reminds, “The narrator is the most central concept in the analysis of narrative texts. The identity of the narrator, the degree to which and the manner in which that identity is indicated in the text, and the choices that are implied lend the text its specific character” (18). If a more neutral and reliable narrator were to relate Chris and Margaret’s love story, the text would arguably be more successful as a tragedy, for it would involve the suffering of more psychologically-realized characters. Yet the multiple registers in which West uses Jenny allows for a social critique not otherwise possible.

This critique becomes all the more apparent when one recognizes the moments in which Jenny more overtly misreads her cousin. When Margaret comes back to the house at the end of the novel, Jenny is preoccupied with the way Margaret’s shabby appearance “constantly contrasted” with one of the room’s elegant decorations, a beautiful white nymph in a black bowl:

Beside the pure black of the rusty bowl [Margaret’s] rusty plumes looked horrible; beside that white nymph, eternally innocent of all but the contemplation of beauty, her opaque skin and her suffering were offensive. [...] Perhaps it was absurd to pay attention to this indictment of a woman by a potter’s toy, but that toy happened also to be a little image of Chris’ conception of women. Exquisite we were according to our equipment; unfleshed by appetite or passion, even noble passion; our small heads bent intently on the white

flowers of luxury floating on the black waters of life; and he had known none other than us. (57)

If this reflection had come at the beginning of the novel, it could be attributed to Jenny's ignorance of Chris' relationship with Margaret, but she has already heard Chris' story of falling in love with a woman without "luxury." As to the notion of Chris' preferred women being "eternally innocent of all but the contemplation of beauty," one of the few direct quotes from Chris offered in the Monkey Island section contradicts this explicitly. Chris fondly remembers conversations with Margaret, as she "forgot her shyness" when they talked, telling Jenny, "She's such good company. She's got an accurate mind that would have made her a good engineer" (36). Jenny's refusal to remember this later, or even acknowledge it in the moment, is revealing. Neither "accurate minds" or nearsightedness (another attribute of Margaret's that Chris recounts) fit with Jenny's ideas of what make a romantic heroine, and thus they are ignored. Jenny's description of the nymph and bowl reveals much more of her own value judgments than that of her cousin's.

Furthermore, the white figure "unfleshed by appetite or passion" vividly calls to mind Kitty, whom Jenny has described, in her white satin, as looking "cold as moonlight, as virginity," "her hands and face and bosom shining like snow" (26-7). Yet Chris, seeing Kitty upon his return home, cannot even keep his gaze on her; he is by Jenny's own admission, thinking of someone else. When Kitty reminds him that he gave her the necklaces she wears, Jenny tells us, "...he answered kindly. 'I am glad I did that. You look very beautiful in them.' But as he spoke his gaze shifted to the shadows in the corners of the room. He was thinking of another woman, another beauty" (27). The clear contradictions in Jenny's narration call into question her entire presentation of the events. Instead, readers of Jenny's narration must continually navigate the

text's moments of disjuncture between the idealizing Spinster narrator and the suggestions of West's feminist ideology, and produce a more complex conclusion.

### **“Queer[ing] All Judgement”: West’s Satiric Disjunctions**

Thus far, it may seem that such suggestions of feminist ideology only come from a consideration of West's journalistic work, yet they also exist within the novel, albeit more subtly. They are most obvious in the tonal shifts that occur between Jenny's descriptions of abstracted romance and her descriptions of Kitty, who adheres to typical feminine conventions. Here, it is helpful to return to the broader question of the spinster's social and cultural context. Though West articulated her own definition of the type, there were other connotations with the type that West would have been well aware of, and which also appear to be consciously invoked in her creation of Jenny. To return to West's colleagues at *The Freewoman*, the idea that spinster, denied of sex, experiences “all-pervasive unrest and sickness, which changes all meanings, and queers all judgments” clearly suggests a non-normative orientation. After all, the spinster challenged the very conceptions of gender and womanhood of the early twentieth century. As Rachel Carroll writes in 2012:

Given the centrality of marriage and motherhood to the normative gendered identity of adult women in late Victorian England, to fail to proceed to these conditions is in some way to forfeit the identity of “woman,” a failure signified by the construction of a gendered category of identity other than woman: the spinster. [...] As Janet Fink and Katherine Holden write, the figure of the spinster “challenge[s] the institution of marriage and the emotional, sexual and financial dependency assigned to the roles of wife and

mother by the marriage contract.” Spinsterhood, whether elective or unsought, calls into question the heterosexual construction of gender. (27)

To one who might imagine this to be an exaggeration, a projection from a twenty-first century preoccupied with destabilizing gender binaries, consider this proclamation from *The Freewoman* in 1911: “The Spinster must either keep her womanhood at the cost of suffering inordinately for the thing it is, and be compelled to turn what should be an incidental interest into the basis of all interest; or she must destroy the faculty itself... There is no alternative” (“One” 12). And if she destroys her “womanhood,” what is she? As Carroll concludes, “To paraphrase Monique Wittig: a spinster is not a woman” (27). The Spinster, then, in addition to her association with sentimentality, was clearly a potential icon and marker of queerness, at a time when the language for such was limited. If, on the one hand, West’s Spinster narrator serves to subvert idealizing notions by drawing attention to the very impulse to make them, Jenny’s “queer” moments in the text also work to destabilize heteronormative paradigms.

The first comes with the only instance of physical violence in the novel (save Jenny’s imaginings of the war), when Kitty dares to assert that Chris is “a man like other men” (31). Though Jenny’s response could be read as a defense of Chris’ character—Kitty has, after all, just accused him of infidelity—the moment draws attention to Jenny’s physical presence in a way little else in the novel does, and stands out as a point of disjuncture. Jenny first describes how she has “felt [Chris’] agony all evening like a wound in [her] own body” (31). Jenny’s bodily identification with Chris might go unremarked, but the moments after bring the queerness of the scene into focus. After Kitty makes the suggestion that Chris has had an affair, Jenny interrupts her, but to no avail: Kitty’s “little pink mouth went on manufacturing malice” (31). The synecdoche highlights Kitty’s femininity, just as West’s verb choice connotes an artificiality she

will often associate with the traditionally feminine Kitty.<sup>26</sup> Jenny relates, “I gripped [Kitty’s] small shoulders with my large hands and shook her till her jewels rattled and she scratched my fingers and gasped for breath” (31). The contrast between Jenny’s “large hands” and Kitty’s “small shoulders” draws obvious attention to ways in which Kitty is traditionally feminine, and Jenny is not—as does her very un-ladylike violence. This long sentence, capturing the passion of Jenny’s response, is then followed by a short one, which reads in contrast as startlingly cool and self-possessed. We have just been told that Kitty cannot breathe, and Jenny reflects: “But I did not mind so long as she was silent” (31). For all of Jenny’s sentimental embrace of romance elsewhere, in her interactions with Kitty, a much more cynical, more stereotypically masculine figure emerges, one who also appears highly critical of the conventional trappings of femininity and female roles.

It is worth considering these moments, for they not only offer a new angle from which to consider West’s philosophical project, but highlight the shifts in tone which further serve to destabilize Jenny as a narrator. In the opening pages, Kitty is sitting in her dead son’s nursery, and Jenny assumes she is reflecting on her loss. Jenny “turn[s] away so that [she] might not spy on Kitty revisiting her dead” but is quickly summoned back by Kitty, who says, “Come here, Jenny. I’m going to dry my hair.” Vanity, not grief, is behind Kitty’s choice, for, as she admits, “I always come in here when Emery has washed my hair; it’s the sunniest room in the house. I wish Chris wouldn’t have kept it as a nursery” (4). Jenny’s next description of Kitty offers a glimpse of West’s sardonic humor: “[W]hen I looked again I saw that her golden hair was all about her shoulders and that she wore over her frock a little silken jacket trimmed with rosebuds.

---

<sup>26</sup> Consider, for example, the scene in which Jenny describes Kitty searching for the best lighting to present herself to Christopher in (26), and describes her jewels as “giving a passion to the *spectacle*” (emphasis added) of her self-presentation upon her husband’s return. Jenny remarks that “She sat still for a time, so that he might feel this well” (27).

She looked so like a girl on a magazine cover that one expected to find a “7d” somewhere attached to her person” (4). This sounds more like the West the feminist journalist, who bemoans the woman who “gives herself up to the development of her sexual attractiveness” and “makes the toiling earth subserve it” (*Young* 119) than a romantic Spinster.

West’s satiric judgement of a particular brand of male-centered femininity continues in other descriptions of Kitty, and again sounds more like West than Jenny (who has elsewhere exalted physical beauty and bemoaned Margaret’s lack of it). Late in the novel, the grieving Kitty still manages to “glow” because “she was going to meet a new man and anticipated the kindling of admiration in his eyes” (74). Such a line, suggesting narrative judgment, contrasts with the glorification of physical beauty Jenny expresses in other passages. Jenny goes on to reflect that women like Kitty “are obscurely aware that it is their civilizing mission to flash the jewel of their beauty before all men, so that they shall desire it and work to get the wealth to buy it, and thus be seduced by a present appetite to a tilling of the earth that serves the future” (75). This wry critique of women’s looks as a cog in the capitalist machine concludes with this ironic verbal shrug: “There is, you know, really room for all of us; we each have our particular use” (75). The tone of this social commentary could not be further removed from the dreamy portrait Jenny painted earlier; indeed, the two passages do not even feel like the same narrator.

Instead, they reflect West’s convictions about the limitations of domesticity, and her judgement of women who, rather than pursuing further education or an active public life, have “relapsed into the isolated home of [her] husband.” Writing in 1913, West proclaims that these women “outside of their intimate relationships...have taken nothing from life and given it nothing” (*Young* 170). Kitty’s preoccupation with beauty—the house’s and her own—are satirized as reflecting limitations placed on women which often are all too willingly accepted.

When Jenny expresses understandable concern because they have not heard from Chris on the Front, Kitty tells her not to “fuss” and “ben[ds] over her image in her hand-mirror as one might bend for refreshment over scented flowers” (5). The satiric judgement in these lines forces one to question the sincerity with which Jenny attempts, in the next lines, to “build about [her] such a little globe of ease as always ensnared [Kitty]” (5). Of course, an alternate reading might see lines such as these as motivated by simple jealousy. Indeed, Jenny refers directly to her love for Chris in several different instances, and to her jealousy of Margaret; it would be no stretch to suppose her jealous of Chris’ wife. But while this certainly can be one level on which the text is working, readers would be remiss to ignore the larger comment Jenny’s critiques make on women who find their self-worth in their own beauty and their relationship to a man, content to be the “prized pig” of a rich marriage. West believed adamantly that women, married or not, had a duty to involve themselves in social and political life,<sup>27</sup> and Kitty clearly fails to see beyond her “globe of ease” and her mirror. Jenny, as an outsider, can see and comment on these details as one subsumed within the heteronormative sphere—a woman like Kitty herself—often cannot.

Despite West’s satiric critique of women like Kitty, her larger target is not of individuals, but of institutional fantasies—the type perpetuated by her sentimental Spinster. The romantic concept of the woman who is put on a pedestal, yet unrecognized as an individual, is the contraposition to the invisible spinster, her golden double. Both women are rendered invisible, for they are unrecognized as individuals. In a poignant earlier reflection, Jenny “perceives, for the first time,” after Chris passes her without seeing her, “that he had never seen [her] at all save in the most cursory fashion; on the eye of his mind...[she] had hardly impinged” (53). Despite

---

<sup>27</sup> See her essay “Autumn: The Fate of the Drudge” from the April 4, 1913 issue of *The Clarion*.

being the most important person in Jenny's life, her cousin literally and figuratively does not see her. Spinsters, in the eyes of society, are invisible, a point reinforced when Jenny meets Dr. Gilbert Anderson, who has been called to help Chris regain his memory. Jenny recounts that the doctor "took a good look, and as he realized I did not matter shook off the unnecessary impression like a dog coming out of water" (73). Though Jenny demonstrates a kind of blindness to Chris' and Margaret's personhoods, West also shows how a parallel blindness is turned upon Jenny herself.

The text's complex engagement with the power of sight and recognition become clear in some of the strangest moments in Jenny's narration, moments which combine, even within a paragraph, the sentimental Spinster with the queer subversive agent. At the novel's end, Jenny has reflected that Chris cannot be allowed to remain in his "magic circle," of romantic amnesia, for there would come a point when "his joy at the sight of Margaret disgusted the flesh, because his smiling mouth [would be] slack with age" (88). If Chris continued in this state, then Jenny's romantic idealization of him would be threatened; he "who was as a flag flying from our tower would become a queer-shaped patch of eccentricity on the countryside... He would not be quite a man" (88). This seems at first a clear stabilization on Jenny's part of gendered norms: men should be "flags"—clear markers of the identity of the estate, kings reinforcing the memory (and fantasy) of England's feudal past—not creeping around the bushes continuing a youthful romance when they no longer even look the part. However, West again subverts a straightforward reading through unexpected choices in Jenny's narration. For example, Jenny, who previously found such torment in Margaret's worn hands and lined face, never mentions the other *woman's* aging appearance in this section. It is not because of Margaret's wrinkles that Chris' love for her would inspire disgust, but because "*his* smiling mouth [would be] slack with

age” (emphasis added). What would be intolerable to Jenny is the imagined day when “one’s eyes no longer follow him caressingly” (88). This inversion of the male gaze, and the erotic connotations of “caress,” especially coming from Chris’ single cousin, again demonstrates West’s tendency to subvert and challenge gender expectations.

Her sight, however, is flawed; her vision of Christopher remains as divorced from reality as her fantasy of his romance is. Jenny “find[s] comfort in remembering that there was a physical gallantry about [Chris]” and falls into a “deep daze of devotion which followed recollection of the fair down on his cheek, the skin burnt brown to the rim of his grey eyes, the harsh and diffident masculinity of him” (89). West clearly signals Jenny’s paradoxical delusion, for “daze” suggests a lack of clear thought, a limiting rather than penetrating view. Though some of West’s critics have interpreted her work as one-sided—sympathetic to women while seeing men as “evil-doers”<sup>28</sup>—here she clearly demonstrates both men and women to be capable of reducing each other with their vision.

However, the most overtly queer moment in the book again unsettles an understanding of Jenny as only a sentimental Spinster. In it, Margaret has just announced that she will disabuse Chris of his fantasy. Jenny and Margaret then kiss, “not as women, but as lovers do” (88). Jenny continues, “I think we each embraced that part of Chris the other had absorbed by her love” (88-9). The moment is surprising, given that Jenny has expressed mostly revulsion toward Margaret, albeit later tempered with sympathy. Sharon Ouditt, who primarily focuses on *The Return of the Solider* as a war novel, reads the kiss as having “implications for a female solidarity which offers hope for the destruction of the male order” (116). Yet the moment is too fleeting and out of character for both women to support this reading, especially as the novel ends with a continued

---

<sup>28</sup> See Ferguson (1980).

focus on its eponymous soldier. However, what West does offer is a moment of queer desire, one in which women see themselves transformed, not by *being* loved, but by doing the loving themselves. As in every moment in which Jenny breaks from gendered convention, West reminds readers that women cannot be reduced by a myopic patriarchal vision, but are active and creative agents in their own narratives and lives.

When the choice must be made for Chris between Margaret and Kitty, the most obvious reading is that his acceptance of reality is a necessary tragedy. It is, yet the choice is not the binary Jenny has presented, between the “bitter drink” of truth (89) and the “magic circle” (88) of his love. For the fantasy Jenny has offered of his romance is that this is what love looks like: uncomplicated, idyllic, free from conflict. It is no coincidence that she minimizes the fight that broke him and Margaret apart many years ago—one based on jealousy, insecurities, and class—for these are the issues that the sentimental Spinster believes never invade the sacred sphere of true love. Likely Christopher and Margaret could not sustain a life together even with his memory unrestored, but the reasons are practical—most notably, their respective spouses and their class differences—not because Chris’s “mouth [would be] slack with age” or because he “would not be quite a man” (88). Those concerns reflect Jenny’s preoccupations with outdated, idealizing tropes, not the actual conflicts the characters face. West alerts readers to this fact through the contradictions and moments of rupture within Jenny’s narration, while also acknowledging the intoxicating allure of the romantic fantasy.

Recognizing a feminist motif in West’s text does not undermine its status as a war novel, or a meditation on loss, both personal and national. Conceptions of masculinity, femininity, and romance are inextricably entwined with these issues as well. In drawing attention to West’s

unconventional use of her narrator, I hope to have shown how critical the novel is of conventions of the past, or indeed of any conventions or fantasies that do not look forward toward a more equal future. This is key, for it would be easy to read the novel as nostalgic, mourning not only the death of Chris's romantic dream but of "an innocent, unspoiled England that had been lost, not because of war alone, but because of the whole disfiguring process of modern change," as Samuel Hynes calls it in his introduction to the text (x). Yet in countless articles written in the years surrounding the publication of *The Return of the Soldier*, West called repeatedly for revolution, not eulogies for a lost innocence. West's spinster narrator is at times unreliable, at times satiric, but in both modes, she draws attention to gendered conventions and the falseness of romantic fantasies of the past. Bernard Schweizer, though he does not focus on gender politics, recognizes that the novel

may be read as an object lesson in the effects of any selective fixation on the past, which is shown to be pathological insofar as it robs its practitioner of what West calls "process." Indeed, life's most sacred and elemental principle to her was process, be it temporal, historical, stylistic, or epistemological. For West, what is static is dead and what is processual breathes life. ("Modernism" 30)

Sentimentality and nostalgia might comfort, but West's era demanded reconceptualization, a move away from staid and idealizing depictions of women and romance, to one that let in life, in all its complexity. Relationships, after all, are nothing if not processual—constantly changing and evolving along with the people in them. And there was more at stake for West than ideas of romantic love: until these fossilized conceptions were dismantled, there could be no equality between the sexes. West's narrative subverts the old model not by abandoning feminine literary convention (as if only masculine modes could hold the path to the future), but by challenging it

from within. With Jenny as unstable Spinster narrator, West draws attention to sentimental modes and acknowledges their appeal before undermining them.

### **Anita Loos: Literary It Girl**

Despite the differences in tone and style of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Anita Loos' first novel, can, like *The Return of the Soldier*, be understood as adopting what Margaret D. Stetz calls a kind of "sideways feminism" ("Sideways" 51), in which the path to critique or to power is indirect. Such an approach reflected the frequent reality for women that "one was only allowed to move diagonally," yet that did not mean that one was not "winning gloriously" by doing so (West qtd. in Stetz "Sideways" 51). Stetz's definition comes from her consideration of a 1928 story of West's, itself titled "Sideways," published in the American middlebrow publication *The Saturday Evening Post*, and featuring a protagonist much like Loos' Lorelei Lee in her use of strategic deceit. The story offers a further link between West's and Loos' careers, for, as Stetz writes,

Here, West, an innovative British modernist, used an American middlebrow weekly to explore a new kind of feminist protagonist who did not, at first sight, look feminist at all, but who would become the prototype of a long line of heroines for her later works—women who preserved the lives of the innocent through lies, evasion, and indirection... Her British contemporaries watched with great interest, as an experimental woman writer with progressive political sympathies and aesthetic principles swerved into the territory of the transatlantic middlebrow market and demonstrated that this market could, if approached properly—that is, "diagonally"—open itself to an unlikely outside force...both politically and aesthetically; [West] helped to pioneer for her modernist

contemporaries the oxymoronic category of subversive feminist middlebrow fiction.

(“Sideways” 62)

West was continuing, in an even more mainstream and conservative publication, what Anita Loos had begun in her serialized novel in *Harper's Bazaar* three years earlier: feminist satire lightly disguised by the trappings of middlebrow convention.

*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* found remarkable commercial success upon its publication,<sup>29</sup> as well as garnering praise from literary luminaries such as James Joyce and Aldous Huxley.<sup>30</sup> Yet it remained largely ignored by scholars until half a century after its publication,<sup>31</sup> and its status as a feminist novel is still a matter of some debate. While Susan Hegemon does recognize a kind of “comedic revision” (526) in Loos’ approach to gender roles, she does not go as far as to call the novel a critique of such.<sup>32</sup> Faye Hammill calls both *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and its sequel *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* (1928) “wide-ranging satires of interwar American culture, including among their targets consumerism and conspicuous consumption, psychoanalysis, Hollywood, New York high society, flapper culture, the discourses of self-improvement and positive thinking, Prohibition, and censorship” (*Women* 57). Hammill is correct; Loos makes cheerful fun of all of these in the course of Lorelei’s travels, but another sustained critique goes unmentioned: that of the romantic narratives that mask women’s inequality.

---

<sup>29</sup> First serialized in *Harper's Bazaar*, Loos boasts that “This was the first time men had ever read the *Bazaar*—the newsstand sales doubled, then tripled” (*Gentlemen* xxiii). Once in book form, the first edition immediately sold out, and by the time Loos wrote *A Girl Like I*, there had been 45 subsequent editions (272). Now nearing the centennial of its publication, the novel has never gone out of print.

<sup>30</sup> James Joyce supposedly saved the last of his failing eyesight for Lorelei, (*Gentlemen* xxiii) Aldous Huxley reported being “enraptured by the book” (qtd. in Frost, “Blondes” 293), and William Faulkner offered “envious congratulations” in a letter to Loos (*ibid.*, 306).

<sup>31</sup> The first scholarly consideration of note is T.E. Blom’s “Anita Loos and Sexual Economics: *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*,” published in *Canadian Review of American Studies* in 1976.

<sup>32</sup> “Taking *Blondes* Seriously,” 1996.

Understanding this critique necessarily starts with Loos' own positioning as a public figure. While Rebecca West was a literary celebrity, Anita Loos was a celebrity, full stop. As a screenwriter, she was a celebrated name in Hollywood well before the publication of her novel. Her work with D.W. Griffith titling *Intolerance* (1916) helped establish her reputation, and soon her name was appearing on films featuring the stars of the day (Loos, *ALR* 43). Significantly, it was both her looks and her wit which made her a star even before writing her best-selling novel. D.W. Griffith sent her on a path toward celebrity when he arranged for her to go on a publicity tour for *Intolerance*, telling her "Those 'learned' remarks of yours, coming from the mouth of a flapper, ought to amaze the gentlemen of the New York Press"<sup>33</sup> (Loos, *Girl* 133). Petite, fashionable, and sporting one of the era's first bobbed haircuts, Loos found herself the subject of articles—with accompanying photos—in *Photoplay*, and, at least according to her autobiography, receiving as much fan mail as any emerging starlet (Loos, *Girl* 132). Loos' public persona should be considered in an interpretation of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, not only because audiences of her day would have read with it in mind, but because it reveals a far more complex and compelling interplay of author and character than modern audiences might otherwise apprehend.

Loos saw herself as both It Girl and intellectual. Keyser notes a 1928 ad for Cutex nail polish featuring Loos in which "the advertiser turns Loos into the equivalent of a flirtatious, fashionable society girl" (Keyser 66). Yet Loos also repeatedly refers to herself as a *cérébrale* (*Girl* 61, 67, and 120) who found school too easy to be interesting, choosing instead to "read [her] way through the Carnegie library" (*Girl* 61). When speaking at the Harvard Faculty Club and asked where she gained the "sex experiences indicated by [her] writing," she replied, "From

---

<sup>33</sup> Despite the designation, which at times she appears to enjoy, she also once replied upon being asked if she was a flapper, "The only thing I ever flapped was the pages of a yellow legal pad" (qtd. in Somerville and Morgan 88).

Baruch Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, and George Santayana” (63).<sup>34</sup> In a telling example from her autobiography, she describes being mistaken for Clara Bow: “The It girl and I were supposed to look alike and sometimes on leaving the Brown Derby I was mobbed by her fans, for whom I graciously signed Clara’s name in autograph albums” (*Girl* 121). However, within the same paragraph she notes that moments like these were an exception, because of the long hours and early mornings she put in for Griffith. It Girl she might be, but her work always came first.

Even today, critics have difficulty reconciling these aspects of Loos’ persona. Feminist film historian Giuliana Muscio, writing in 2010, seems incredulous that Loos, despite being able to claim “legitimate literary fame and intellectual frequenting” included in her autobiography detailed descriptions of the clothes she would make for herself and “frivolous interests such as hairdos and makeup” (293). Certainly the world into which she brought *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* could not reconcile the intellectual and the performatively feminine. The novelty of a “learned” flapper writer may have intrigued the public,<sup>35</sup> but in the first decades of her career, Loos was faced with men who found the ideas of femininity and intelligence (especially when used in service of a career) wholly incompatible. Loos writes in *A Girl Like I* of what she calls her “sex problem”:

...it taught me very early to keep my mouth shut about my literary career. When I first mentioned it to a beau, he thought I was lying. It was only too easy to prove the truth by producing a few letters of acceptance.<sup>36</sup> They caused an even more unfortunate reaction; my beau didn’t want to believe I was an authoress; I no longer seemed to be a girl. (70)

---

<sup>34</sup> This response amused the audience, as it was no doubt intended to, but Loos writes elsewhere of her “profound love” for these philosophers, and reflects that her “interest in sex stems directly from the brain” (*Girl* 62).

<sup>35</sup> Dorothy Parker, quintessential “learned flapper” would not gain notice for several more years; she began writing for *Vanity Fair* in 1918.

<sup>36</sup> Film treatments bought by D.W. Griffith and others.

This ostensible dichotomy between femininity and intellectual achievement can be seen in some of her early film work, such as her 1913 film treatment “The Highbrow” (later released as “Highbrow Love”).<sup>37</sup>

In the scenario, Loos describes the young Laura Alden, who is “shunned by the other children who almost fear her” simply because she is “a serious little thing much given to reading.” She welcomes the attention of boys, but if any try to talk to her, another schoolmate intervenes with the message, “She doesn’t like boys, she likes books” and Laura “goes on alone, as usual” (*ALR* 18). After taking the typical spinster position of governess, we see her watching from a window as a group of young people embarks on a picnic party:

Finally one of the young men turns, shouts to the others, “I’m going back to ask Miss Alden” and runs into the house. Laura is so delighted she can scarcely believe what she has heard. She hastily arranges her hair at the mirror and waits in delight for the knock at her door. Just as the man reaches her door, however, one of the daughters of the house runs after him and stops him. “Don’t bother her,” she says. “She hates men. She’s such a highbrow!” So they turn and leave and Laura, who has heard them through the door, bursts into tears. (18-19)

It is interesting to note that in both of the instances in which someone interferes to reinforce the binary of heterosexual romance v. intellect, that person is female. Despite Loos’ describing her personal experience with that dichotomy as originating from male romantic interests, here we see her acknowledgement that women are often as guilty of reinforcing limitations and conceptions as men.

---

<sup>37</sup> The text, along with other unpublished film treatments, short stories, and one-act plays, is newly available to the public in *Anita Loos Rediscovered*, a collection compiled and edited by Mary Anita Loos, Loos’ niece.

As the film continues, we learn that “Laura becomes literally the “highbrow” of popular convention; an old maid immersed in her books.” Loos undermines the conception of cause and effect when it comes to women like Laura—it is not antisocial behavior that leads to her position on the outskirts of life, but imposed ostracization that provokes her isolation. However, hope comes in the form of Tony Antonio, “a prosperous young Italian vendor of plants and flowers,” who mistakes her for a servant and courts her. Though initially insulted, eventually “her pent up womanhood comes to the surface” (19) and Laura decides to continue the courtship while in the costume of a maid. The ruse is exposed, however, when Tony, intending to propose, surprises her in the classroom where she is teaching geometry:

Tony stands stupefied in the doorway for some time before she sees him and when she does turn she reads in his face the same look of fearsome respect that men have always shown her; the look one gives a “highbrow.” Mumbling some kind of excuse, Tony says goodbye and goes. Laura watches after him, sees romance leave her life, smiles a grim little smile and goes on with the geometry. (19-20)

Considering the dramatic conventions of exaggerated expression in silent film acting, Loos’ choice to write such an understated response for her heroine, especially at a climactic moment, is significant. However, in Laura’s “grim smile” she signals the emotional resilience and pragmatism of women who get on with their lives despite society’s—and men’s—myopic classification of them.

However, this is a “Comedy Drama” (18), not a tragedy, and as such, the story does not end here. A year passes, and a servant announces that Laura has a visitor: Tony, with high school diploma in hand. Tony tells her “now I am a highbrow too” and the film ends with him “tak[ing] her in his arms” (20). Loos utilizes the conventions of romantic comedy to imagine a world in

which an intellectual woman could find romantic satisfaction without sacrificing herself or her career. However, in her own life, Loos at first found it necessary to keep her aspirations and achievements hidden, deciding that “[her] literary life belonged to a secret world where [she] could be alone with my plots and those exciting vouchers signed by the scrawl of an unknown man named Griffith” (*Girl* 70).

Loos’ literary life would not stay secret, of course, but the early need she felt to create a kind of double life for herself helps uncover a key theme of duality and partition in her first novel. Understanding that Loos herself was both intellectual and *It Girl* complicates a reading of her two main characters, disrupting the neat categories into which one might otherwise put the wry and witty brunette Dorothy and the stereotypically blond Lorelei. Rather than operating strictly as two unique characters, they should be read instead as a bifurcated presentation of a kind of femininity not yet socially acceptable. Wit implies critique—the last thing a girl wants if her goal is to win over a man, and thus the more overt humor is outsourced to the novel’s de facto spinster Dorothy, who can—and will—remain unattached. Yet Loos encourages us, through both plot and narrative technique, to consider these two characters in conjunction rather than as unique agents.

In considering this kind of narrative doubling, it is helpful to bring in Lori Landy’s work on the female trickster, for she notes that “[t]he trickster, a mythical figure associated with duality, is often a figure of doubleness” (*Madcaps* 11). Landy reads only Lorelei herself as a female trickster, yet her own emphasis on the duality of the trickster supports my reading of Lorelei and Dorothy as working in tandem. On the level of plot, the two women work together to deceive Lorelei’s suitors, and in their characterological differences, Loos offers a strategic case of the trickster’s characteristic doubling, “a mimetic representational strategy that defines two

figures in terms of each other.” Landy explains that this effect “often show[s] two sides of the same coin—the dualities that the imagination conceives of as opposite and irreconcilable” (10). Together Lorelei and Dorothy create a trickster double which highlights the plight of the intellectual It Girl—something “irreconcilable” in the contemporary popular imagination.

### **A Party Is Only As Good As Its Guests: An Invitation to Active Readership**

In order to understand this doubling, one must understand Loos’ creation of active readership—the work she does to create a “producerly” rather than “readerly” text. Much of the humor of the book would not succeed if readers were not actively engaged on a meta-textual level. Part of this is due to the misspellings and mistranslations, which, in their strategic deployment and clever double meanings, alert readers to authorial presence and intent. The Eiffel Tower becomes “the Eyefull tower” (73 ); chic becomes “sheik” (a term which, according to Lorelei, the French use for everything, but Americans “only seem to use...for gentlemen when they resemble Rudolf Valentino” [91]). Because the errors are not constant, as they would be in an actual diary a young woman of marginal education, their intentionality and double meanings become apparent: “for instance” becomes “for instants,” reflecting the whirlwind pace of Lorelei’s life. When Dorothy threatens to reveal the truth about Lorelei’s past to the press, Lorelei says she “ought to keep her mouth closed in the *presents* of reporters” (139, emphasis added), suggesting both the temporality and potential gift of fame and publicity. In another instance (or “instant”), when a “gentleman friend” tells her he knows she’s got a brain because “when he comes into *contract* with brains he always notices it,” (4, emphasis added) the phrase is a slip for a common idiom, but also echoes the way interactions work in the novel: Lorelei’s interactions with men are indeed contracts (her company in exchange for gifts), if unspoken

ones. Readers must actively engage with a visual rhetoric that works on multiple levels, yet the work never feels like work. As Laura Frost points out, “What is remarkable about Loos is that she deploys the ‘mandarin’ mode of heightened textuality...without being gnostic, obscure, or inaccessible. For Loos, there was no inherent contradiction between [high and low] orders of pleasure, only systems of cultural classification that made this seem so” (232-233). Loos’ decidedly modern technique of asking her readers to engage with the constructedness of the text by drawing attention to its materiality, mutability, and potential for double meanings draws from her early work in film. As Brooks Hefner observes, while her modernist contemporaries “struggled to find ways to incorporate the new visual aesthetic of cinema,” which included “fragmentation, reconstruction, elision, and the complex relation between the visual and the textual,” Loos, as an early theorist of film narrative, was one of the first to make clear how even popular fiction could incorporate this aesthetic (108).

Both Frost and Hefner base their arguments in large part on Loos’ work on intertitles, the cards that appeared between scenes in silent films to give key information or dialogue. Previously seen as a sort of necessary evil, and not worthy of consideration in their own right, Loos was the first to exploit intertitles’ potential for extra-textual comedy, creating cards that contrasted humorously in tone from the original, or commented on the action to comedic effect. As Frost observes, “Fundamentally changing the concept of cinematic pleasure as passive vision (‘they need only sit and keep their eyes open’), Loos’s titles presumed and even created an active audience to whom they offered a new kind of pleasure: literary visual pleasure” (217). These cards draw attention to the act of creation, to the text *as constructed*, in much the same way as Lorelei’s spelling errors, which also create what Frost terms “literary visual pleasure”. Readers—Loos’ activated audience—are simultaneously drawn into Lorelei’s fictional world while always

remaining aware of the educated author dropping witty references to Freud and Joseph Conrad, even if her narrator refers to them as “Froyd” and “a set of books...[that] all seem to be about ocean travel” (12). Loos’ winking misspellings and references, like her intertitles, clearly acknowledge the interplay between the fictional world represented and those who actively consume it; both work in the space between.

My argument builds off those of Frost and Hefner, for within the extra-textual space that they recognize can be found evidence to support a reading of Loos’ main characters as working differently than they have been read in the past. Though critics have recognized echoes of Loos in *either* Lorelei or Dorothy, they have not read her as overtly drawing on her authorial persona to create *both* of her main characters. Readers are taught early on not to conflate author and character, yet Loos deliberately aligns herself with both characters from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in her autobiographical writing and in the novel itself. Lorelei recalls in an early entry that she “will never forget when Mr. Griffith was directing *Intolerance*” (10), immediately invoking Loos herself, and she ends *A Girl Like I* with an ode to Dorothy, saying that “in affairs of the heart I was [her] most accurate prototype” (275). Loos encourages readers to conflate her with her characters, thus providing a particularly vivid example of what Maria DiBattista describes as the imagined author, a figure who plays a significant role in readers’ experience of the text. As DiBattista explains, such an authorial presence is one “with distinguishing features and characteristics that produce in our mind’s eye that mirage called personality” (*Imagining* 8). Thus when we read Lorelei’s seemingly off-handed remark that “Lady Shelton said she knew we Americans loved dogs so she would love us to meet her mother” (49),<sup>38</sup> the mirage of Loos’ droll personality shimmers through.

---

<sup>38</sup> Literally speaking, the Countess breeds dogs.

This authorly presence may seem less apparent to modern readers for whom Loos is not a household name. However, Loos preserves it by acting, from the 1963 publication onwards, as the book's "host," with the preface "Biography of a Book". As Phillippe Lejeune reminds, paratext is "the fringe of the text," but one which "controls one's whole reading" (Jeune qtd. in Genette 2). Loos' paratext is particularly significant, for it provides a concentrated distillation of two of Loos' primary modes: satiric wit and winking self-deprecation. It also instructs readers on how to read those modes in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Describing the genesis of the novel, Loos writes of witnessing a blonde on a train "being catered to and cajoled by the entire male assemblage" (xvii). Loos says that she begins writing there on the train, "not bitterly, as I might have done had I been a real novelist, but with an amusement which was, on the whole, rather childish" (xix). The self-deprecation of referring to herself as "childish" and not a "real" novelist is undercut by the implicit assertion that "real" novelists are emotionally vulnerable—bitter when faced with personal slights. If Loos had simply made herself the subject of ridicule, then she would have been guilty of what some feminist critics claim of self-deprecation—an ingratiating stance that affirms the dominant patriarchal ideology. However, the satiric humor in Loos' self-deprecation which directs the focus outward (toward "real" writers) confirms her larger purpose. As Nancy Walker writes, "Caught in, and aware of, [the] web of stereotypes" that surrounded them, "women have used self-deprecation in a complex way: to appear to adopt the stereotype, yet to challenge it and the cultural assumptions that underlie it at the same time" (124). Just as Joan Riviere famously described femininity as "a mask, behind which man suspects some hidden danger" (42), in Loos, self-deprecation is almost always a mask for a critique.

Any impulse to take Loos' self-deprecation at face value is also contradicted by her assessment of her own intelligence the page before. When comparing herself to the "hearty"

blond who “so far outdistance[d] [her] in feminine allure” she does not hedge: “there was nothing to discuss; I was the smarter” (xviii). All this would seem to support Keyser’s reading of Loos as “establish[ing] [her own] singularity and superiority of...wit and professionalism at the expense of the brainlessness and sexuality of bombshells” (68). However, I will argue that while Loos does exploit the stereotype of the bombshell, she does not do so at Lorelei’s expense. Instead, elsewhere in the novel she aligns herself with Lorelei as well as Dorothy,<sup>39</sup> creating in the novel the fictional unit of a doubled character: two characters which the text asks be read *in terms of one another*, rather than as separate individuals, because they represent two aspects of the same construct. In creating this fictional unit of Dorothy and Lorelei, Loos reflects the fragmentation of self that necessarily results when a woman possesses both erotic appeal and critical intelligence.

### **A Girl Like We: Dorothy and Lorelei as Fictional Unit**

Examining the 1928 Cutex ad featuring Anita Loos, Keyser suggests that “[i]nstead of opposing glamour and wit, as Loos does through the distance between narrator and implied author in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*,” the advertiser presents her as a flirtatious socialite, “bring[ing] Loos commercially close to Lorelei Lee” (66-67). While Keyser is correct about the slippage between Lorelei and Loos in this commercial medium, the “distance” she observes between narrator and implied author in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is not consistent. While it is true that much of the humor of Lorelei as narrator comes from the comic tension created by the

---

<sup>39</sup> Loos’ description of her relationship with her sister Gladys supports a recognition of “doubling” in the text. Though Loos writes that although “[n]o two could have been more different than we were,” their mother treats the two sisters, one of whom is brunette and the other blonde, as twins. Her description of their personality also echoes both Lorelei and Dorothy: “Gladys was...always in the midst of things, whereas I remained on the sidelines, making impudent comments” (ibid.).

discrepancy between what she ostensibly knows and what the readers know (such as when Lorelei says of the gay French couple Louie and “Robber,” “it is really refreshing the way he and his son love each other” [92]), or from Dorothy’s more overtly ironic humor, this is not always the case. There are more than a few instances in which Lorelei’s own sharp wit is on full display. When confronted by Lady Francis Beekman, who threatens to take Lorelei to court for using “undue influence” to encourage her husband to purchase a diamond tiara, Lorelei responds, “If you wear that hat into a court, we will see if the judge thinks it took undue influence to make Sir Francis Beekman look at a girl” (78). Here Lorelei’s retort is indistinguishable from one of Dorothy’s comic barbs.

Though Lorelei’s actions already challenge her “dumb blonde” façade, her moments of ironic reflection make it impossible to believe in her child-like act, and in fact show Lorelei to be much more like Dorothy than critics have traditionally understood. These occur more frequently near the book’s conclusion, when readers have become fully aware of Lorelei’s clever manipulations of the men in her life (all while professing an “innocence” we know is false). To take a few examples: Lorelei hopes to keep her debut party “very very quiet” lest her fiancé find out, because “all Henry has to do to spoil a party is to arrive at it” (140). When it comes to Henry’s family, she is not coy with her feelings, reflecting, “I am beginning to think that family life is only fit for those who can stand it” (146). The matriarch of this family bears the brunt of Lorelei’s dry humor. Mrs. Spoffard is a dithering drunk who thinks Lorelei is “all sunshine” and dreams herself of being in the movies. Lorelei charms her with chocolate liqueurs and the promise of a role in the films Lorelei is helping to produce, but her diary reflects her true feelings. “I mean I even believe we could put in a close-up of her from time to time,” Lorelei writes, “because after all, nearly every photoplay has to have some comic relief” (161). Her true

feelings come out in even fuller force when she says that she has “given orders to all of the electricians not to drop any lights” on Henry’s senile father (who enjoys talking to the actresses on set), but lets slip that she is “not going to bother to speak to the electricians about Henry’s mother” (164). Though they appear less frequently than Dorothy’s witty asides, Lorelei’s moments of sharper, more direct humor align her with Loos, as does as her presence at the end of the novel in the Hollywood world of “photoplays.” It also shows Lorelei’s own humor to be much more like Dorothy’s, even if we see it less frequently.

Of course, the majority of the novel’s witty observations do come from Dorothy, but here, too, Loos blurs the boundaries between the characters. Dorothy’s witticisms are always filtered through Lorelei in the form of reported or indirect dialogue, taking the structure “Dorothy says/said,” and occur often enough that they become a primary method of narration. As Noël Dolan observes, “Dorothy’s presence in the novel is more that of a voice than of a fully developed character” (75). However, rather than see this as a potential flaw, readers should understand this choice as strategic. Dorothy’s observations often reflect Lorelei’s own views, albeit more directly: they are what Lorelei would likely say if she was not busy putting on her act. For example, when confronted with “paste” diamonds, “Dorothy said ‘paste’ is the name of the word a girl ought to do to a gentleman that handed her one” (72). Such “unrefined” (a word Lorelei often applies to Dorothy) behavior as punching an offending gentlemen would not be suitable given Lorelei’s pretense of ladylike decorum, but she is still able to fully express the sentiment by mediating it through Dorothy. Similarly, when informed that a disliked acquaintance “came from a very very fine old family and really had a fine brain,” “Dorothy said, ‘If she really has got such a fine brain I bet her fine old family once had an ice man that could

not be trusted” (108). Lorelei cannot directly suggest something as scandalous as illegitimacy being the reason for an offspring’s glimmer of intelligence, but Dorothy can.

This mediation is all the more necessary for Lorelei because of the male expectation that she be sexually innocent and refined, both of which preclude being funny. As Kate Sanborn reflected in the first anthology of women’s humor, *The Wit of Women* (1895),

There is a reason for our apparent lack of humor... Women do not find it politic to cultivate or express their wit. No man likes to have his story capped by a better and fresher from a lady's lips. What woman does not risk being called sarcastic and hateful if she throws back the merry dart, or indulges in a little sharp-shooting. No, no, it's dangerous, if not fatal. (qtd. in Walker 85)

However, Dorothy has liberty to “indulge in a little sharp-shooting” because she fills a spinster role in the novel: as Lorelei’s committed companion, the novel’s happy ending does not depend on her romantic union, and though she may flirt with men, by the novel’s conclusion she remains unattached. Dorothy’s status gives her a freedom of expression that Lorelei lacks. While Lorelei continually self-edits (she reports having told Gerry “things that I really would not even put into my diary” [13]), Dorothy faces no similar restraint: her humor is direct, irreverent, ironic, and, if not crude, certainly flirting with the edge of respectability.

Careful attention to the way Lorelei incorporates Dorothy’s wit and observations into her narration shows what Hammill calls her “prudish disapproval” (“One of the Few” 28) of her friend to be insincere. Despite Lorelei’s concern over Dorothy’s lack of “reverence” (6), her choice to include her observations of nearly every episode she recounts speaks to her actual allegiance to Dorothy’s viewpoint. There are even places where Lorelei starts to slip, correcting herself when she initially neglects to attribute a humorous observation to her friend. For

example, here is Lorelei's description of Lady Francis Beekman upon first meeting her: "So Lady Francis Beekman came in and she is a quite large size lady who seems to resemble Bill Hart<sup>40</sup> quite a lot. I mean Dorothy thinks that Lady Francis Beekman resembles Bill Hart quite a lot, only she really thinks she looks more like Bill Hart's horse" (77). Thus, instead of reading Loos' characters as reflecting "a division between one who acts and one who reflects and comments, one who works in deception and one who reveals the truth" (Dolan 75), we should read Dorothy and Lorelei instead as a narrative doubling.

This fact is reinforced by Ralph Barton's iconic illustrations from *Harper's Bazaar*, which still accompany modern editions of the text. In many cases, Lorelei is in the foreground, portrayed in light hues, while Dorothy stands to the side or just behind in darker tones. In several illustrations, she is shown to be looking at Lorelei while Lorelei looks at a man. This also reflects the sense of doubling. John Berger describes the "split in female consciousness" as the "surveyor" and "surveyed" (10), a split which comes as a result of being born "within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men." Berger goes on to say that "[a] woman must continually watch herself. She is almost always continually accompanied by her own image of herself" (46). Landy observes this split in advertising of the period that shows a similar "surveyor" and "surveyed," but Loos' readers can also observe it clearly in visual representations of Lorelei and Dorothy.

This reading of Lorelei and Dorothy as narrative unit is strengthened by the fact that on the level of plot, they are also nearly inseparable. They accompany each other on dates back in New York, make life decisions based on each other ("Dorothy is always wanting me to go back to the cinema because Dorothy says that she will go if I will go" [19]), and move as a unit

---

<sup>40</sup> William S. Hart, an actor of the silent film era known for his role in westerns.

through London, Paris, and “The Central of Europe”. Even men often treat them as a kind of set: when Mr. Eisman gives Lorelei “quite a nice strand of pearls,” he also gives Dorothy a diamond pin (21-22). Furthermore, despite both being young, attractive, and interested in men, their relationship is never competitive; in fact, Lorelei makes the point of attesting that “I really think that there is nothing as wonderful as two girls when they stand up for each other and help each other a lot” (77). Despite Dorothy’s playful jabs at Lorelei and Lorelei’s professed frustration at Dorothy’s “unrefinement,” on the level of plot and motive, the two are nearly always in alignment. (The one moment in which they are not—when Dorothy must give up her lover—actually strengthens the reading of them as a narrative unit, a point to which I will return.)

Instead of reading Dorothy as a “counter-narrative,” as Hefner has suggested, understanding Lorelei and Dorothy as a narrative unit allows readers to see the resonances with the lived experience of women forced to choose between public identities as (witty) intellectuals or as “It Girls” defined by their sexual appeal. Helpful in understanding this dichotomy, and the ways it might be overcome, are the concepts of agonistic and hedonic power. Landy explains that “[a]gonistic power is based on actual or threatened force. For humans, education, weapons, education, expertise, strength, and money are the sources of agonistic power. Hedonic power is achieved through adornment, display, and indirect methods of control like charisma, withholding of affection or sex, and dependency” (*Madcaps* 6). The two kinds of power are usually diametrical, yet a narrative technique such as Loos employs has the power to unite them. Lorelei’s power on the level of plot is clearly hedonic. Yet Loos’ techniques—her control of the narrative, her textual manipulations, Lorelei’s own humor, and her inclusion of Dorothy’s commentary blended into Lorelei’s reflections—is agonistic, and thus disrupts the binary opposition between these forces. Just as “[d]oubles in cultural texts often show two sides of the

same coin—the dualities that the imagination conceives of as opposite and irreconcilable” (Landy *Madcaps* 10), Lorelei and Dorothy show that these two forms of power actually often rely on each other even as they present publicly as opposing.

### “[N]o Country for We Girls”: Exposing the Hypocrisy of the Marriage Plot

In a culture that had no problem reconciling intellect and wit with femininity, there would no need for this kind of narrative doubling. But as Nancy Walker points out, “a dominant theme in women's humor is...what it is like to try to meet standards for behavior that are based on stereotypes rather than on human beings” (x). Loos plays on those stereotypes and shows them to be deceptive while also acknowledging their hedonic power. As limiting as stereotypes of femininity might be, the joke is not on the women who perform them, but on the men who are so in thrall to the power of pink “negligay” (59) and a performance of helplessness that they fail to see a woman’s true character or intentions. As Landy reflects, “Because the public discourses about femininity are riddled with contradictions, most revolving around polarized notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women, the creation of the double is one way to achieve complexity in representation” (*Madcaps* 10). The added irony in Loos’ doubling is that Lorelei flips the script on what is considered “good.” Dorothy is crass but largely genuine, whereas Lorelei tells men exactly what they want to hear—in the case of the Puritan Henry Spoffard, playing the role of an “old fashioned girl” (106) who believes “a penny earned [is] a penny saved” (104) but only so that she can actually exploit and deceive them. The irony is intensified when Lorelei attempts to correct Dorothy on her behavior; a running joke of the novel is that Lorelei is attempting to “reform” Dorothy. Whatever Lorelei might tell men like Mr. Spoffard, Dorothy’s real flaw, in Lorelei’s eyes, is that she “is always getting to really like somebody and will never learn how to

act” (56). “Act,” of course, has a double meaning: the sense of correct social behavior, but also of performance and deceit. Here we begin to see the further reach of Loos’ satiric project, the subject of which is not only society’s limited vision of women (which results in the need for a split characterization), but of “romance” as it exists in a culture with such a view.

Despite the political moves in the early twentieth century toward equality, Loos signals the wide divide between political progress and an actual shift in a typical man’s view of women with Lorelei’s first lover, Gerry. He seems at first to be an enlightened, if unfaithful, young writer; he has married a suffragette and tells Lorelei “not to dress up, because [he] seems to like [her] more for [her] soul” (12). Readers learn of Gerry’s hypocrisy on the next page, however, for though “Gerry does not like a girl to be nothing but a doll” he does like her to “bring in her husband’s slippers every evening and make him forget what he has been through” (13). In addition, and more damningly, in Lorelei’s eyes, he “does not seem to like the kind of life [Lorelei and Dorothy] lead in New York and...wants [her] to go home to papa in Arkansas” (18). Lorelei gives up Gerry, who has encouraged her to write, because she realizes that a trip to Paris (financed by Mr. Eisman) is a better way to “broaden out and improve [her] writing, and why should [she] give it up to marry an author, where he is the whole thing and [she] would be the wife of Gerald Lamson?” (20). Lorelei is to Gerry what she is to all men, something to possess and control, and if she must use other men to escape those restrictions, she will do so. As Landy says, “[t]ricksters illustrate theorist Michel de Certeau’s maxim, ‘People make do with what they have.’ They use impersonation, disguise, theft and deceit to expose hypocrisy and inequality, to subvert existing social systems, and to widen their sphere of power” (*Madcaps* 12). For those who would argue that women were already widening their sphere of power through more

legitimate means, such as expanded roles in the workplace, Loos offers a characteristically satiric response in her description of (non-euphemistically) working women.

While traveling by train through “The Central of Europe,” Lorelei and Dorothy pass a scene of field workers, one which might, in other hands, might be painted as idyllic. Though contemporaries of Loos such as D.H. Lawrence and Radclyffe Hall would romanticize rural life, Loos gives a more caustic account of the working woman’s country life:

...it was really quite unusual. Because it was farms, and we saw quite a lot of girls who seemed to be putting small size hay stacks onto large size hay stacks while their husbands seemed to sit at a table under a shady tree and drink beer. Or else their husbands seemed to sit on a fence and smoke their pipe and watch them. So Dorothy and I looked at the two girls who seemed to be ploughing up all of the ground with only the aid of a cow and Dorothy said, “I think we girls have gone one step to far away from New York, because it begins to look to me as if the Central of Europe is no country for we girls.” (101)

On the one hand, this is a light satire of men’s willingness to let women do the hard manual labor while they recreate, relax, and make of the women a visual spectacle. Yet the scene also reminds readers that women working is nothing new, and in a patriarchal culture, is only another opportunity for oppression and exploitation. Though Lorelei’s life might seem far removed from such an existence, her response gives a sense of the stakes that such a scene makes apparent.

While Dorothy’s teasing claim that Lorelei will “probably end up in the Central of Europe doing a sister act with a plough” (102) is an exaggeration, the reality that she depends on men to avoid a life of menial work is not a joke. Lorelei becomes “quite worried” and “quite depressed” (102); her act with men may present as frivolity and decadent indulgence, but it is a game with very real stakes, determining her social class and future. It is no surprise that after this conversation she

decides to “look for some American gentleman and hold a conversation, because [she] really feel[s] so depressed” (102). In fact, it is immediately after this encounter that Lorelei embarks on her most brutally pragmatic of her conquests, Henry Spoffard, a man who, as Loos acknowledges in her preface, “is repulsive to [Lorelei] physically, mentally and emotionally” (xx). Again, the doubling of Dorothy and Lorelei offers both satiric humor and social critique: Dorothy’s more direct and socially conscious wit combined with Lorelei’s narrative misdirection (such as describing the lethally dull Mr. Spoffard as “quite delightful”) serves to offer a more complex representation of women and their response to enforced limitations.

Furthermore, for those who would speak of the 1920s as a time of increased opportunities for women in the workforce, Loos offers Lorelei’s early work as a stenographer as a reminder that the workforce was in many ways as much a game of looks as the marriage market. Lorelei has only been in business college a week before “a gentleman called Mr. Jennings paid a call...because he wanted to have a new stenographer” (32). Lorelei’s description makes clear that the employer’s decision is based solely on looks, and not experience: “So he looked over all we college girls and he picked me out. So Mr. Jennings helped me quite a lot” (32). Her euphemistic “helped” strongly implies a sexual relationship; as Hegemon puts it, “the implication that Lorelei was hired to do something other than stenography simultaneously literalizes the emerging image of the ideal secretary as a man's office “wife” and obscures Lorelei's identity as a worker” (533). There is no separation, Loos makes clear, between the worlds of work and sex for a young woman.

However, this should not suggest that Loos paints her heroine as a victim. In contrast, readers learn that Lorelei had no problem shooting her employer when she discovered him with another woman. Loos’ satire here is not only of the terms of Lorelei’s employment, but of the

ease with which her feminine charms absolve her of consequences when she commits a crime. Lorelei relates, “So the jury was only out three minutes and then they came back and acquitted me and they were all so lovely that I really had to kiss all of them and when I kissed the judge he had tears in his eyes and he took me right home to his sister” (32). Laurie Cella observes that “when Lorelei describes her brush with murder, her grammar displaces the responsibility for the crime to her revolver, which diminishes her own culpability: ‘the revolver had shot Mr. Jennings [32]’” (48-49). Loos’ send up of men like Judge Hibbard who would be taken in by Lorelei’s performance of eye-batting innocence gains added piquancy when one realizes that Lorelei’s narrative choices serve to work in a similar way upon the reader.

Such a view of human interactions as dominated by duplicity and hope of personal gain (whether on the part of Lorelei or the men who wish to sleep with her) could read as purely cynical. However, through her doubled character, Loos offers a more complex vision. Dorothy, like many women, resists a transactional view of love and sex, yet the presentation of her relationship with a financially disadvantaged man shows how social forces conspire to thwart even the most romantically sincere. Dorothy is described as “madly in love” (64) with Gerald, a Kit Kat dancer, and their affair ends when the young man shows up at the station, promise gift in hand, to stop Dorothy from leaving. The scene has the potential to be rife with romantic melodrama. Loos, however, undercuts any sentimentality of the scene by offering this account:

So Dorothy is quite upset because she did not want to come as she is madly in love with Gerald and Gerald said that we really ought not to leave London without going to see England while we happened to be here. But I told him that if England was really the same kind of a place that London seems to be, I really know too much to bother with such a place. I mean we had quite a little quarrel because Gerald showed up at the station with a

bangle for Dorothy so I told Dorothy she was well rid of such a person. So Dorothy had to come with me because Mr. Eisman is paying her expenses because he wants Dorothy to be my chaperone. (64-65)

Hefner comments that Dorothy's "running commentary lets a counternarrative emerge as a challenge to the artificial narrative surface" (115). It is significant, then, that despite Dorothy's frequent commentary, in this scene we get none of it. However, if we accept Dorothy as a facet of Lorelei, it makes sense. There is no room for sentimentality in this scene, but neither does it invite Dorothy's overt cynical humor. Instead, we get humor as distraction from sentiment: Lorelei's impatience with seeing England (why bother if you've seen London?). In *A Girl Like I*, Loos reflects on the emotional paucity of relationships like Lorelei's, concluding that "sooner or later the most successful gold-diggers will find themselves nursing an empty void" (33). To belabor this sentiment would make *Gentlemen* a very different book, threatening both the effervescence of its tone and its unsentimental satiric humor. But to leave out the possibility of emotionally fulfilling relationships would be to shortchange women and their potential for emotional integrity, rather than highlighting the actions necessitated by a flawed system.<sup>41</sup> Again, the doubling allows Loos to accomplish a more nuanced satiric critique: Dorothy pursuing emotionally fulfilling relationships (even if they must be abandoned), and Lorelei admitting, after Piggie has sent her the daily dozen orchids that she insisted on, that she was "really glad to get out of our rooms at the Ritz" because "50 or 60 orchids really make a girl think of a funeral" (65).

---

<sup>41</sup> In this way, Loos both anticipates and challenges feminists of the 1970s such as Germaine Greer, who would claim "love is not possible between inferior and superior, because the base cannot free their love from selfish interest, as the desire either for security or social advantage..." (146).

What Loos makes clear is that women's financial dependence on men, when combined with a widespread refusal to understand women as complex individuals (let alone equals), makes non-transactional interactions impossible: simply put, preconceptions and power imbalances prohibit any meeting on equal ground. Yet Loos still concludes her novel with that most classic and cherished comic ending: the marriage. As Andrew Stott notes, "comedies from classical antiquity through to the romantic comedies of the present day have conventionally ended in marriage, as an affirmation of the social contract and a commitment to the future peopling of the world" (86-87). Marriage, or at least the promise of it, is a prerequisite of the happy ending, and not only does Lorelei achieve matrimony, but her match results in a situation in which everyone she has come "into contract with" has become "happy" (161). The irony, of course, is that Lorelei's situation is, in actuality, an utter subversion of said social contract and procreative commitment. She marries Henry Spoffard because it allows her the freedom (financial and social) to continue her work in the movies and her relationship with a young movie producer, while her husband is happily entertained providing "spiritual aid" (163) (a thinly veiled euphemism) to starlets. Therefore, while "[t]he traditional comic plot insists that the boy gets the girl and creates a new social order with himself as leader" (Barreca, *Untamed* 19), Loos' comic plot ends with the girl getting the boy and creating her own unorthodox social order, one which is both personally and professionally fulfilling.

Dorothy receives a similar narrative treatment—an ending that seems to fit her social type, yet in actuality subverts it. She continues in her spinster-like role, no longer ostensibly chaperoning Lorelei, but serving as a facilitator of the text's primary union by rescuing her friend from accidentally ruining her changes with Mr. Spoffard. In this way she continues in a typical spinster role. However, most novels that prominently feature spinsters end with their tragic

solitude, or their own “happy ending” in the way of a romance. Dorothy gets neither, though she does get a “happy” ending, conveyed by her characteristic sardonic amusement. Lorelei writes, “And even Dorothy is very happy because Dorothy says that she has had more laughs this month than Eddie Cantor gets in a year” (164). By laughing, the spinster denies the logic of the dominant paradigm that insists marriage is the surest path to happiness.

However subversive Loos’ plot may actually be, the text’s comic structure no doubt contributed to it not being taken seriously as a work of satiric feminist critique. As Hegemon observes, “[p]erhaps if Lorelei had been presented, like [Edith Wharton’s] Lily Bart, as a tragic victim of men’s passions or of her own venality, the book might have possessed a clearer ‘dramatic significance’ and thus subsequently had a rather different critical history” (531). Yet the fact that few critics have given much attention to the novel’s provocative ending also speaks again to the intersection of agonistic and hedonic power: the text’s power to charm and Loos’ strategic doubling of her main characters deflect the censure that might otherwise be invited by the radical subversion of the marriage plot, or by Loos’ satiric critique of gender politics.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the marked differences in plot, style, and tone, both West’s and Loos’ novels speak meaningfully to the need for a revised understanding of satiric wit, one that takes into account the specific circumstances and reception of female literary production. Such wit might be tucked discreetly into an otherwise serious novel, as is the case in West, or it might be overshadowed by broader humor, as in the case of Loos. Historically, the complexity of West’s and Loos’ critiques has been obscured by expectations surrounding their novels’ genres—a war romance and a serialized comic novel appearing first in a fashion magazine, respectively. In the

case of West, there was no room in the contemporary popular imagination for satiric impulses in a novel concerning the ongoing national tragedy of the war, especially when that novel contained strong currents of romantic nostalgia, and the author herself was a young woman most famous for her own involvement in a doomed love affair. The barriers to serious consideration of Loos' work—that it was overtly comic, female-authored, and produced for a mass audience—were compounded by her own celebrity persona and presentation of conventional femininity. Even Loos' close friend H.L. Mencken suggested the novel's audience would be “a frivolous public”—as Hammill notes, an obviously gendered phrase (“The One” 31)—and upon publication, would be “lost among the ads” of Harper's *Bazaar*, unlikely to offend anybody (Loos, *A Girl*, 267).

Yet in both novels, the satiric currents are not only present, but significant in an appraisal of each author's feminist legacy. For West, they become increasingly apparent when considering her work more holistically—her efforts in the esteemed genre of the literary novel informed by her work in the mass-culture medium of journalism. For Loos, similar holistic appraisal reveals not new satiric impulses—those have long been recognized—but a more subtle and nuanced target of that satire. While Faye Hammill reads Loos' “primary satiric target” as the “semiliterate, philistine lowbrow” (“One of the Few” 29) of Lorelei herself, appreciating the doubled nature of Dorothy and Lorelei shows Loos' target to be more far-reaching—the kind of world that necessitates Loreleis, as well as those who would dismiss her.

To recognize these currents, readers must be attuned to generic and narrative tensions and inconsistencies: Jenny Baldry's snarky asides running parallel to her romantic nostalgia; Lorelei Lee sounding like an airhead one minute and like her sharply intelligent companion the next. Such tensions and disjunctures conflict with the human need for order and harmony—qualities

particularly expected of women's work in popular mediums. Mary Douglas, in her influential anthropological text *Purity and Danger*, explains that "[i]n a chaos of shifting impressions... the most acceptable cues are those which fit most easily into the pattern that is being built up. Ambiguous ones tended to be treated as if they harmonized with the rest of the pattern. Discordant ones tend to be rejected. If they are accepted then the structure of assumptions has to be modified" (36). Understanding this tendency helps to explain why the narrative complexities in West and Loos have been so long overlooked. However, thanks to decades of feminist, and more recently, middlebrow scholarship, the "structure of assumptions" for women's popular novels *has* been modified. Readers have been primed for producerly middlebrow texts that encourage active rather than passive readership, and thus can appreciate more complex critical agendas. Ultimately, discerning the more subtle work of satiric "discord" and strategic doubling in authors like Loos and West reveal new possibilities for representations of both women and romantic narratives within popular genres.

## CHAPTER TWO

Bewitching Freedoms: Alternate Fantasies in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* (1926)  
and Winifred Watson's *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* (1938)

**Introduction**

In the last chapter, I considered novels that worked within popular genres to critique the existing conventions and assumptions around romance, femininity, and sexual politics. In this chapter, I look to authors who continued to engage those critiques through their use of humor, but also put forward alternative visions, ones which managed to preserve the affirmative pleasures of romantic fantasy while rewriting its more limiting and patriarchal tropes. The novels in this chapter—*Lolly Willowes* by Sylvia Townsend Warner (1926) and *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* by Winifred Watson (1938)—do so by harnessing the power of one of the oldest “feminine” genres available: the fairy tale.

Fairy tales as a genre tends to be associated with the most rigid of social types—indeed, of archetypes: the young maiden, the old crone, the evil queen. Yet while Warner's and Watson's novels offer self-identified spinsters as protagonists (and, in the case of *Miss Pettigrew*, a co-starring It Girl), they challenge the conventional understanding of those labels through their plots and satiric humor. One way they do this is to reveal the falseness of the divide between the It Girl and the spinster. Though the specific dividing line between the two was not definitively fixed in years, (in the early twentieth century it seemed to be somewhere around age thirty), the imaginative gulf between the two was immense. This divide allowed for a series of convenient patriarchal responses to single women—they could be dismissed either as socially irrelevant, dependent spinsters or paternalistically censured as out of control children (It “Girls,” not

women). Yet authors such as Warner and Watson show these divides to be artificial, and work to negate such responses and provide a fictional corrective. Laura Willowes begins the novel as a girl, and despite her official designation as Laura Erminia Willowes, Spinster (57), the end of the novel finds her whirling in dance at the Sabbath and roaming country hillsides, closer to the girl who liked “climbing trees and jumping over hay-cocks” (20) than the popular vision of a subdued and aging spinster. In *Miss Pettigrew*, both Delysia LaFosse and Guinevere Pettigrew challenge their designations as It Girl and spinster by the novel’s end, with the younger woman trying her hand at monogamy and the elder at romance. As with all of the novels in this dissertation, *Lolly Willowes* and *Miss Pettigrew* offer single women, young and old, who challenge the limitations of society’s labels.

Warner’s and Watson’s novels offer alternate visions to women who were drawn to romance and adventure but not to accompanying staid and sexist conventions. In doing so, they challenge the view of women’s history which understands the inter-war years as “one of feminism’s deepest troughs,” defined by reactionary attitudes to the war and suffrage (Light 9). Alison Light observes that “it is hard to reconcile this somber and depressing depiction of the inter-war years as a slough of feminine despond with the buoyant sense of excitement and release which animates so many of the more broadly cultural activities which different groups of women enjoyed in the period” (9). That sense of excitement and release permeates the modern fairy tales of Warner and Watson. Fairy tales have always had much to say about our own lives, desires, and beliefs, reflecting back the culture from which they emerge, but, in their mutability, also offering powerful opportunities for subversion. Warner and Watson provide rebelliously joyful feminist visions—new archetypes for women who, in Laura Willowes’ words, “know they are dynamite...[e]ven if other people find them quite safe and usual” (Warner 213-214).

*Middlebrow Enchantments*

In fairy tales, appearances are deceptive. A horse-and-carriage is really a pumpkin pulled by mice; a beastly exterior hides a prince. So, too, the names of Miss Pettigrew and Lolly Willowes, who provide the titles of the novels here considered. The “Miss Pettigrew” of Winifred Watson’s *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* (1938) is actually Guinevere, named after the young queen of the Arthurian legend (63)—a beautiful queen whose illicit love brings about the downfall of a kingdom. Hardly the stuff of spinsters. “Pettigrew,” while perhaps connoting a certain fussiness associated with a stereotypical maiden aunt (especially with that accompanying marker of singledom, “Miss”), also contains the suggestion of growth, and the novel is indeed the story of a woman growing beyond the confines of an imposed stereotype. Miss Pettigrew’s name only masquerades as that of a typical spinster, while actually intimating romance on the grandest scale, a hero(ine)’s journey. The eponymous Lolly Willowes in Sylvia Townsend Warner’s 1926 novel is actually named Laura; “Lolly” is a nickname given by a young niece and kept in use by condescending and exploitative relatives. Both the character’s first and last name are significant. “Laura” comes from the feminized version of the Latin *laurus*, or laurel—a plant long associated with victory. As for her surname, before willows were Christianized as a symbol of grief,<sup>42</sup> they were associated with Hecate, Greek goddess of the moon, who also taught sorcery and witchcraft. A victorious witch, then, resides where others see “dear Aunt Lolly.”

*Lolly Willowes* follows Laura as she undergoes a transformation both understated and profound. Chafing at her stifling life under the roof of her brother and his family in London, she finds herself compelled by a growing autumnal “disquiet” (72) to move to the country village of

---

<sup>42</sup> This connection probably originates with Psalm 137: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept / when we remembered Zion. / There on the willow-trees / we hung up our harps” (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*).

Great Mop, where she eventually becomes—with little fanfare and no authorial censure—a witch. The novel is a fairy tale for women who, as Laura explains late in the novel, wish “to have a life of [their] own, not an existence doled out to [them] by others” (215), and Warner uses the motif of witchcraft to illustrate the desires and ambitions that run unfulfilled through countless women’s lives. *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* does not offer even the subdued thread of the supernatural that *Lolly Willowes* does (witchcraft, in Warner, amounts to little more than an affinity for herbal arts and a preference to be left alone). Watson’s text does, however, sparkle with the magic of wish fulfillment and a charmed version of society in which a middle-aged spinster could become “Miss Pettigrew, mistress of fate, king-maker” (196). The novel offers readers a modern-day fairy tale of transformation, as the downtrodden and diffident Guinevere—through a day of adventures with her new friend—learns the extent of her own powers and worth.

It is not only the presence of witchcraft or a Cinderella-like transformation that make fairy tales a fitting place to begin a consideration of these novels. The power of enchantment runs through both novels thematically and textually—as their heroines encounter their own transformative magic, so too are the readers beguiled by the light touch of the narrative, the novels’ respective wit and charm. In *Uses of Reading*, Rita Felski devotes a chapter to the concept of enchantment in literature. She quotes Joseph Boone, writing that “[t]hrough the act of reading we can experience a condition of ‘absolute powerlessness, enacting the intense human desire to let go – to be released, to yield to an ‘other’” (qtd. on 51). There is a potent parallel between the freedom Laura Willowes finds in giving herself over to a new, socially un-sanctioned force and the pleasurable beguilement felt by readers. Reviews at the time called

*Lolly Willowes* “enchanted,”<sup>43</sup> and praised its author for “weaving a story out of a delicate, transparent material, which, although it makes a complete pattern in itself, yet gives glimpses of another, stranger, and yet more entrancing pattern behind.”<sup>44</sup> Warner’s mix of wit, realism, and fantasy turn what could be didacticism into enchantment. In the case of *Miss Pettigrew*, humor makes pleasurable a rejection of the stifling limitations and expectations put on women both young and old.

Nevertheless, there are those who might argue that neither novel goes far enough in its social critique; the plots of each may be quietly radical, but they hardly stoke revolution. Viewing the novels through the lens of the fairy tale helps provide a response to such charges. Marina Warner observes that “the memory of...oral origins make fairy tales long to please” and thus such stories must “enter that audience’s economy of beliefs” in order to delight. Both novels work within, rather than in opposition to, certain expected tropes, and so follow the fairy tale in its “contrary directions...toward acquiescence on the one hand and rebellion on the other” (*Beast* 409). *Lolly Willowes* accomplishes this in part through her use of understatement; Satan appears not as a horned monster but as a sympathetic gamekeeper, the extent of whose devilry is a comic attack of bees. Warner renders a world in which witchcraft seems so reasonable and charming that when Laura’s passionate feminist speech comes at the end, there is nothing to induce the readers to resist her argument. As Kate Macdonald attests, “Warner’s control over her construct is absolute: the urbanity of the narrative voice reassures and controls the reader’s responses” (224). So, too, in *Miss Pettigrew*: readers are entranced along with Guinevere as she becomes “intoxicated” (21) with Miss LaFosse and her “bohemian” (224) life of nightclubs and multiple lovers. It quickly becomes clear that what Guinevere thought were steadfast morals were only

---

<sup>43</sup> L.P. Hartley in *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, Feb 6, 1926.

<sup>44</sup> Anonymous reviewer writing for *The Living Age*, Apr 10, 1926.

the conventions of a society that found her redundant and invisible. Though Watson's text inarguably promotes a turn away from the patriarchal values of the church and conventional society, the humor and sympathetic narrative voice actively discourage readers from resisting its charms or turning on it a critical or moralizing eye.

While these texts' power to enchant only intensified their cultural force, the same qualities have also made them of less interest to traditional academics. Books such as those by Watson and Warner have been, historically, books to enjoy "sitting back" (Humble, "Sitting" 46); they have been relegated to the realm of leisure rather than Literature. For this reason, they have resisted analysis or sustained critical attention. Macdonald notes that despite *Lolly Willowes'* warm critical reception and popularity, it was not taken very seriously by reviewers,<sup>45</sup> perhaps due to the novel's fantasy elements (217). *Miss Pettigrew* was popular enough to warrant a movie deal (with Billie Burke of *The Wizard of Oz* fame set to play Miss Pettigrew), but "the intervention of war, after which the Hollywood studios concentrated on making morale-boosters, prevented the picture from being made" ("Winifred Watson"). Despite this auspicious beginning, the book remained out of print until 2000, and critical work on it remains nearly nonexistent. Yet new scholarship on the middlebrow has demonstrated that the divide between highbrow and middlebrow literature is more about class anxiety than any intrinsic quality of the books. As Humble argues, the decades in which Watson and Warner wrote were ones in which "the older signifiers of haute-bourgeois status—education, wealth, access to culture—became available to a wider middle class" and thus "the signifiers of class distinction became increasingly rarefied and nebulous: particular tricks of speech and minutiae of dress, taste and manners become the means of determining others 'not one of us' or 'PLU' ('people like us')"

---

<sup>45</sup> *The Bookman* called it an "exquisite trifle" ("Poetry").

(“Sitting” 44). One way to claim a more refined taste was by reading literature that clearly signaled its aesthetic elevation. Both *Miss Pettigrew* and *Lolly Willowes*, in contrast, were popular with the middle class and challenged class distinctions within their pages, in addition to lacking the formal challenges that set highbrow literature apart from leisure reading.

An additional reason for critical neglect is the relative obfuscation of the novels’ argumentative work. This is another common feature of the middlebrow novel, which, even when it humorously critiques, avoids the openly polemical approach of satirical modernists such as Aldous Huxley or Wyndham Lewis. Yet both Warner and Watson’s novels enact what Marina Warner calls the “heroic optimism” characteristic of fairy tales; “they promise happier times, and while doing so, pass judgment on the conditions of the present” (“That Which is Spoken”). *Lolly Willowes* offers a nuanced and satiric critique of society’s attitudes towards spinsters, one that Winifred Watson engages differently but no less persuasively in *Miss Pettigrew*, her utopian revision of the spinster narrative. Both novels reward attuned and repeated reading. Though the description of them as enchanting rather than challenging readers might suggest a closer alignment with the more passive pleasures of popular film, close reading and an enraptured film viewing are, as Felski argues, “tied together by a common experience of enchantment, of total absorption in a text, of intense and enigmatic pleasure” (*Uses* 51). Readers of the first half of the twentieth century could find readerly pleasure while still feeling the sway of the novels’ concealed radicalism. Readers today can appreciate, through close reading, the nuances in craft of the authors’ deceptively undemanding prose.

*Fairy Tales, Feminism, Modernism*

First, however, greater context is required to situate these texts in the fairy tale tradition, and to prove why such a positioning is important to a scholarly understanding their work. It can be counter-intuitive to suggest that fairy tales can offer a rewarding lens for critical, feminist inquiry when one considers the charges brought against the genre. Feminist critics of the 1970s, in working to dismantle the sociocultural myths that perpetuated women's oppression, rightly targeted fairy tales as powerful scripts in the lives of children, especially girls.<sup>46</sup> Fairy tales, as they had been disseminated, often reinforced heteronormative scripts and encouraged passivity and obedience in women while vilifying any female characters who make claims to power. At their worst, fairy tales have taken the form of misogynistic didacticism disguised as romantic fantasy, designed to acculturate young woman to patriarchal subservience.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, "worst" often coincides with most popular. Canonical fairy tales are inordinately focused on heterosexual romance and marriage; many of Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm's and Charles Perrault's fairy tale heroines are indeed passive and obedient (or punished if they are not), evil step-mothers and witches abound, and a subtext of forced marriages (which, of course, turn out to be for the best) runs through some of the most famous tales.<sup>48</sup> However, several things must be considered here which complicate a uniform vision of fairy tales as oppressive and misogynistic.

---

<sup>46</sup> Influential texts include "'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale" by Marcia R. Lieberman (1972), *Women Hating* by Andrea Dworkin (1974) and *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* by Mary Daly (1978).

<sup>47</sup> Some critics take such charges even further; Susan Brownmiller argues that classic stories such as "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Snow White" serve as parables of rape which train women to be victims of sexual violence (Haase 3).

<sup>48</sup> See especially tales of animal bridegrooms such as *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Frog Prince*, which "hold out the dream that, although the heroine's father has given her into the keeping of a Beast, he will change—into a radiant young man, a perfect lover" (Warner, *Beast*, 279).

The first is that fairy tales were traditionally a woman's art. Ever since Plato referred to "old wives' tales" in the *Gorgias*, they have been associated with women and the domestic (Tatar xvi-xvii). Though this history is most often used to dismissive effect (as the persistent term "old wives tale" and its connotations attest), the fact remains that fairy tales serve as a rare example of a female intellectual tradition during times when women were rarely formal given educations or the means of preserving and disseminating their voices and histories. While the most recognized names in fairy tales are male, the Grimms' source materials "were women—family friends, servants, and acquaintances" (Tatar xvii). Mme d'Aulnoy, author of fairy tales for the French salon, gave us the term *contes de fées*, from which the very term "fairy tales" originates (Tatar xi), and her contemporary, Charlotte de la Force, gave us the version of Rapunzel we know today.<sup>49</sup> It should come as no surprise that men such as Perrault and the Grimms found more success presenting women's stories to a wider audience than the women would have themselves, or that they were even in a position to do so in the first place.

Nor should it come as a surprise that the curation of these stories reinforced the interests of the status quo. The fact that some of the best known stories perpetuate tropes of passive or jealous women has more to do with the history of selection, editing (and editorializing), and propagation than what could actually be found in the full range of women's stories. In fact, there were a wide variety of these women's stories that deviate from the stereotypical, patriarchal tropes.<sup>50</sup> As Jack Zipes explains, women are stereotyped as they are in the stories we are familiar with because of the "general patriarchal view of women as domestics and breeders, born to serve

---

<sup>49</sup> Like her title heroine, de la Force was also imprisoned early in her life, though her "crimes" were significantly more socio-political—and scandalous—in nature: marrying without permission, possessing a pornographic novel, and satirizing the court of Louis XIV in her verse (Seifert 89-90).

<sup>50</sup> The past three decades have finally brought anthologies of these stories; see Carter (1990), Ragan (1998), and Auerbach and Knoepfelmacher (1992).

the interests of men.” Yet there were “thousands of stories that women told to each other, and that were never collected or written down, in which heroines were assertive, confident, and courageous—in short, nobody’s slave” (*Irresistible* 80). These stories, many of which feature women as witches and fairies, are lesser known not because they are lesser literature, but because of who held the power to publicize and disseminate them. As Kathleen Ragan writes in the introduction of her 1998 anthology of women’s stories, *Victorian folk tale* anthologists “regularly subverted and subsumed the stories that starred strong and illustrious female heroes, promoting instead those stories that showed women as weak or witless or, at the very best, waiting prettily and with infinite patience to be rescued” (xvii). The reason for this kind of bowdlerization was, of course, the supposed “edification and moral education of their presumed audiences” (xvii). Ragan observes that this tradition continued a hundred years later, when Walt Disney “re-emphasized the helpless, hapless heroine” (xvii) in movies so successfully that much of their audience had no idea that other kinds of fairy tales exist.

The timeline that Ragan identifies is important, for it shows the need for identification and recognition of the fairy tales being produced by women between the eras of Victorian “edification” and Disney’s near-totalizing claim on the genre. The 2012 entry on fantasy and modernism in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* does not include a single woman, not even Virginia Woolf’s undisputedly fantastical *Orlando* (Casey). Fantasy tales in the modernist period are understood as a male genre, belonging to authors such as E. R. Eddison, Lord Dunsany, J.R.R. Tolkien, and C. S. Lewis.<sup>51</sup> Yet women never stopped producing fairy tales, as Warner’s and Watson’s novels make clear. Recognizing this is especially important to the social history of the genre. Warner’s and Watson’s novels had broad appeal, yet their

---

<sup>51</sup> Maria Tatar credits Tolkien with restoring “a level of dignity [fairy tales] apparently lacked” when linked with women (or, as Tatar puts it, “gossips, godmothers, and grannies”) (xvii).

message was for women: the attention and narrative sympathy given to their main characters' psychological negotiations and growth could serve as models for women who also wished to break free of repressive conventions. This is in line with the historical function of the fairy tale, in which "women as storytellers have woven or spun their yarns, speaking at one level to a total culture, but at another to a sisterhood of readers who will understand the hidden language, the secret revelations of the tale" (Rowe 398). Watson and Warner use genre conventions—of both fairy tales and of the feminine middlebrow—in connection with strategic humor to signal those "secret revelations of the tale" to a specific female audience. The novels' humor, especially in their moments of free indirect discourse, creates a language that is both hidden and overt, helping these novels speak to a wide reading public but also communicating radical possibilities for women looking for alternate visions of female identity in the first decades of the twentieth century.

### *Unconventional Erotics*

Key to these alternate visions were new conceptions of women's sexuality—a theme fairy tales have always grappled with, despite their reputation as children's literature. Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976) offers the most influential scholarship on the psychosexual underpinnings of some of the most well-known tales. Feminist criticism has historically refuted his work, objecting to his position "that the battles between evil older women and younger, helpless girls are therapeutic and gender-neutral for children" (Jarvis). Instead, scholars such as Maria Lieberman have compellingly argued that the only "'eternal truths' in tales of the Western tradition are the story of women's subjugation and disenfranchisement under patriarchy" (ibid.). Yet fairy tales, as a historically female tradition, offer rich insights into the

anxieties, fixations, pressures, and even pleasures that women could not express outright.

Bettelheim, however problematic, is still helpful in demonstrating the potency of fairy tales for detailed and sustained psychological analysis.

Most fairy tales focus on young protagonists; when they do feature older women they are almost always in the role of helper<sup>52</sup> or antagonist. Both Warner's and Watson's novels are unusual not only in making their protagonists older single women—Guinevere Pettigrew is forty (202) and Laura Willowes forty-eight when she moves to Great Mop (155)—but in offering provocative and progressive visions of those women's sexualities. Though at first Miss Pettigrew's "virgin mind" must "[strive] wildly for adjustment" (14) when faced with the amorous freedom of Miss LaFosse and her three lovers, she soon finds herself "thrilled" with new possibilities (18). One of these possibilities the novel offers is bisexual attraction, which Watson never presents as shameful, or codes as the "perverse" same-sex attraction associated with spinsters.

Instead, Watson presents sexual desire and fulfilment as both natural and transformative for women both young and—more surprisingly—middle-aged. Miss Pettigrew finds herself aroused by Nick, the "bad boy" of Miss LaFosse's suitors, feeling "breathlessness, terror, ecstasy; a slow melting of all her senses toward trembling surrender," yet she also shows attraction to Miss LaFosse herself. For example, when the young woman emerges from the bath, Watson describes Guinevere's response in erotically charged prose: "Miss Pettigrew had a glimpse of beautifully modelled limbs, of flawless, pale-colored flesh. Her face was flushed a delicate pink by the heat. The steam had fluffed her hair into tiny, curling tendrils round her

---

<sup>52</sup> A few examples include the old woman who warns the young bride of her husband's murderous ways in the Bluebeard variations, or the old woman who helps the prince discover the mystery of the twelve dancing princesses in the tale of the same name.

face.” When Delysia slips off the dressing gown and continues “unconcernedly...hunting round for another garment” Miss Pettigrew feels “hot and flustered” and “chide[s] herself” for having “an evil mind” (60) The spinster, in the early nineteenth century, was often portrayed as unfeminine, either “unhealthy in her celibacy or perverse in her involvement in a same-sex relationship” (Rosenthal). Yet Miss Pettigrew, though adhering to the traditional model of the spinster in in some ways, also resists this mold. Her character is admirable and utterly sympathetic, and her desires are never presented as unhealthy. In the same scene she goes on to ask herself, “Didn’t the Lord make [the human body] the same as our faces? Certainly. Would He create anything He thought wrong? No.” and concludes, “I’ve never seen anything lovelier than Miss LaFosse standing there” (60-61). When Miss Pettigrew is kissed “with ardor” by a man for the first time at the end of the novel, she compares the experience to visiting Olympus and rejoices in being “inexperienced no longer” (208). Sexual experience, in Watson’s novel, is a cause for celebration and a road of self-discovery, no matter a woman’s age—hardly a new concept in 2020, but revolutionary in 1938.

The treatment of female sexuality is even more radical in Warner’s novel, and is complex enough that I will return to it in more depth. In brief, Warner presents in Laura Willowes an unbounded sexuality which in turn speaks to a woman’s potential liberation from prescribed roles. It is also an active rejection of male sexuality and its totalizing effect on culture, a force which I argue that Warner aligns with the mechanized and industrialized world. The critiques the two novels offer are the more notable for the books’ impressive popularity—these visions were not on the margins of the literary imagination, but embraced by innumerable readers.

***Lolly Willowes (1926)****Questions of Genre*

It still comes as a surprise to learn that Warner's novel about an unapologetic spinster-cum-witch was, upon its publication in 1926, an international best-seller. The novel went through three publications in eight weeks and sold over ten thousand copies in six months (Harman 66). Furthermore, it received overwhelmingly positive reviews. Warner's biographer Claire Harmon notes that the "Chatto & Windus press cuttings book alone include over ninety notices for *Lolly Willowes*, many of them lengthy, and all favorable" (65). However, Macdonald observes that due to the novel's "oddity value," these reviews rarely took the book seriously, which led to its subsequent dismissal by literary scholars: "The refusal to allow *Lolly Willowes* the status of a serious novel because of its apparently unserious subject ensured that all else that was serious in the plot was ignored" (217).

The novel has received more critical attention in the past twenty years, and is now generally considered in the genre of "English pastoral" (Jacobs 61) or a "fantastical version of a feminist manifesto" (Bingham qtd. in Macdonald 216). Alison Lurie, in her introduction of the novel for its recent reissue by the NYRB press, situates it as the latter, calling it a precursor to Woolf's "A Room of One's Own": "a subtle demand for women's right to privacy and independence from their families, for power over their own lives—even if they had to make a pact with Satan to get it" (xiii, vii). In fact, it is both a realist English pastoral *and* a fantastical feminist manifesto, a paradox wherein lies much of its power.

In the twenty-first century, the works of authors such as Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler have familiarized both lay and scholarly audiences with the potential of literary stories and novels that draw upon folk and fantasy traditions to present new

feminist possibilities. Yet in 1926, there were few, if any, female authors who had used this kind of generic heterogeneity to feminist ends—Virginia Woolf’s fantastical, trans-historical, pseudo-biography *Orlando* would not be published until 1928, and Rebecca West’s “London Fantasy” *Harriet Hume* arrived in 1929—thus situating Warner as ground-breaking not only in subject matter, but in form. It is unsurprising, then, that the novel’s unusual structure (the first explicit witchcraft occurs in the book’s final third) and understated, realist style in service of the supernatural have been a point of interest for recent critics. Macdonald suggests that the novel could be read as a type of “estranged fantasy,” a subdivision of “immersive fantasy” (in which the action takes place in a world constructed to function on all levels as a complete world, separate from the reader’s own). Laura’s world is not *exactly* like our own, yet “Warner immerses the reader into a realist world in which witches happen to live, and the reader finds this quite natural” (224). Macdonald proposes that by creating a world which is rendered as almost entirely realist, Warner naturalizes Laura’s acceptance of the Devil; in this way Warner’s proposition of witchcraft serving as a positive demonstration of women’s free will becomes “more palatable to the public” (234).

All this is well observed, but Macdonald focuses her argument on the 1920s’ “fashion for witches,” and thus misses the lengths to which Warner goes to show that witchcraft, with all its metaphorical significance, has always been a part of British women’s lives. Macdonald cites the “normalizing effect of the contemporary fads for spiritualism and automatic writing, as social activities and in fiction, which had the effect of almost domesticating the occult” (220). However, Britain’s pagan history—especially as it concerned women and witches— extends significantly beyond a social trend of the 1920s. Warner not only signals the long history of

pagan influences in Christian lives, but blurs the line between those practices and the rituals of Christianity, which in fact suggests a more radical project than a mere demonstration of free will.

*“[A]s Common as Blackberries”: The Feminist Significance of the Dianic Tradition*

Warner offers this blurring of tradition through subtle but consistent details, beginning with the early descriptions of Laura’s childhood and family. The Willows are practicing Christians, described as “old-fashioned” and “conservative” (10), yet they have Midsummer Night’s Eve picnics with “moth-beset candles flickering on the grass” (30), and Laura grows up trusting the incantations and herbal talents of Nannie Quantrell (30), and “Old Goody Andrews”<sup>53</sup> with her botanic advice and “respect for the moon” (31). Laura’s father is described as being “careful about omens” (35), and on Good Friday all “the stuffed foxes and otters were taken out of their glass cases and set to sweeten on the lawn” (29). Details such as these combine to create an impression of pagan history seamlessly interwoven into the Christian faith. Warner would have been drawing on scholarship that supports the historical reality of this kind of layering of belief systems. One of the key texts in her research for *Lolly Willows* was the influential *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* by Margaret Alice Murray (1921) (Harman 65). In it, Murray writes of “evidence prov[ing] that underlying the Christian religion was a cult practiced by many classes of the community, chiefly, however, by the more ignorant or those in the less thickly inhabited parts of the country” (Murray 12). This is echoed in Warner’s text, in which the countryside is depicted as more hospitable to pagan energies than industrialized London (though, notably, she does not portray the country residents as ignorant; rather they possess an entirely different, and more laudable, type of knowledge).

---

<sup>53</sup> The title of “Goody” for a woman of humble social status was already archaic by the 1920s (“goody, n.1”); Warner likely uses it for its association with the women charged in the Salem witch trials.

It is important to understand that Warner's historical reference point—variations of what Murray calls a “cult”—were hardly Satanic; they predated Christianity and were referred to by many (including Murray) as Dianic, a term deriving from the goddess Diana.<sup>54</sup> Jane Garrity notes that Murray “is the first feminist historian to counter the conventional wisdom, initially disseminated by the Catholic Church, that witches are the perpetrators of Satanic evil; her book explores the late medieval period in Great Britain to demonstrate that the witch cult was a highly developed pagan religion which Christianity was determined to eradicate” (163). Yet rather than focus on the church's persecution of these traditions, Warner emphasizes the survival of pagan influences and the amalgamation of the two traditions. Pagan elements survived because they were never eradicated; rather, they were either subsumed into or continued to coexist alongside Christian traditions. Recent scholarship, such as P.G. Maxwell-Stuart's *The British Witch: The Biography* (2005) concurs with Murray's findings on this point. Maxwell-Stuart explains that in early British history, around the time of Augustine of Canterbury's arrival in England in 596, Christianity, even among those converted, was “a varied and variable experience” influenced by and co-existing with pre-existing local customs and practices:

[W]hen it came to dealing with unseen forces, people were conscious that there existed two competing systems of power: on the one hand Christianity, which preferred to express itself mainly in Latin, and then the Other—perhaps a remnant paganism or simply a tradition of practical magic handed down alongside the ‘new’ religion. So people were able to turn in their difficulties from Christianity to magic, from magic to Christianity, or to rituals—charms, incantations, curses, or entreaties—which combined

---

<sup>54</sup> This is despite the fact that the central feminine divinities in these communities often predated the Greco-Roman goddess Diana/Artemis (Rashkow 50).

the two, in accordance with which arrangement belief or experience had taught them was the more effective (11).

Nor did such belief necessarily wane in England's more modern history. Zipes notes in 2012 that "[i]n the past twenty years, scholars of the European medieval period and folklore have published a vast amount of essays and books based on new research along with interdisciplinary approaches demonstrating that most people believed in witches, fairies up through the Renaissance, if not through the nineteenth century" (59). Rather than focusing on the occult, as Macdonald suggests, Warner speaks to an interwoven pagan influence that extends through England's history.

By focusing on these influences, Warner offers a version of English national identity that challenges a modern, mechanized, and inherently patriarchal model. Laura is at peace alone in her cottage in Great Mop, finding the wind and rain "pleasant" and reflecting that "[w]eather like this... would never be allowed in London" (100). She spends her days exploring her new wild surroundings, eventually throwing her guidebook—a modern symbol of epistemological domination—down a well. Warner's narration of this event also evokes a pre-modern belief system: "She scarcely knew what she had done, but she knew that she had done rightly, whether it was that she had sacrificed to the place, or had cast herself upon its mercies—content to know no more of it than did its own children" (118). In these lines, the landscape takes on characteristics both maternal and divine, and Laura turns herself happily over to its power.

Garrity contends that "[t]his focus on nature and English pre-history is crucial to an understanding of how Warner seeks to legitimate the spinster-lesbian's entitlement to the nation by associating her with indigenous English values. If rural England is constitutive of English identity, then Lolly's robust love of the 'milky green' (151) and fragrant 'pastoral landscape'

(164) is a sure sign she is marked by essentially English qualities” (Garrity 163). While I do not follow Garrity in her larger argument of Warner’s attempts to legitimate a specifically lesbian identity, she rightly identifies the importance of *Englishness* in Warner’s project:

By moving to the Chilterns, a hidden hamlet in Buckinghamshire whose territorial boundary markers survive from the Anglo-Saxon period, Lolly consolidates her Englishness through identification with the beauty of the landscape, a gesture that aligns her with the interwar agronomists, rural conservationists, and social historians who argued that the land was essential to the spiritual life of contemporary Britons. (Garrity 161)

Yet while Laura is sincere in her reverence for the landscape, the subtle humor Warner employs throughout prevents the novel from falling victim to over-romanticism of the pastoral. When her sister-in-law Caroline comes to visit, Laura struggles to entertain her: “She had allotted an hour and a half to the view, but it scarcely took twenty minutes. At least, that was the time it took walking up to the windmill and down again. The view had taken no time at all. It was a clear day, and everything that could be seen was perceptible at first glance” (126). The contrast between Laura’s anticipation of the fascination the landscape will hold and the reality is not only a source of understated comedy, but conveys the powerfully deadening effect of her conventional city relative. With the “sensible” (126) Caroline at her side, “everything that could be seen was perceptible at first glance,” which really means, of course, that neither woman was capable of detailed observation or attunement to the powers of the natural world.

Despite *Lolly Willowes*’ fantastical elements, Warner also avoids what Raymond Williams identifies as “that uncritical, abstracting literary anthropology, within which folktales and legends became part of an unlocalized, unhistorical past; or the uncritical interest in myth,

which made the land and the people a scene and characters into which anything could be projected” (*Country* 258), a tradition with which he associates authors such as Tolkien. Warner herself was involved in concrete and localized land rights issues, writing essays in the 1920s agitating for the rights of rural inhabitants (Garrity 143). Her political views have bearing not only on her use of the countryside in *Lolly Willows*, but on how issues of class and gender equality intersect in the text. In the 1930s, Warner wrote an article in which “she imagined a communist future of collectivized farms in East Chaldon to which anyone who worked the land had rights of access” (ibid.). This vision echoes the ethos of the Diggers, the group of agrarian communists who briefly succeeded in cultivating common land in the seventeenth century. In the words of Gerrard Winstanley, the voice of the Diggers' community on St. George's Hill in Surrey in 1649: “That which true righteousness in my judgement calls community is this, to have the earth set free from all kingly bondage of lords of manors and oppressing landlords, which came by conquest as a thief takes a true man's purse upon the highway, being stronger than he” (qtd. in Howkins 2). Warner recognized a connection between the rights of all those who were oppressed by “kingly bondage,” be their oppression based on class or gender, and saw the right to land as means of restoring equity. She signals this through Laura's experiences in the novel's opening pages. When Laura's father died in her early adulthood, her relations “took it for granted that she should be absorbed into the household of one brother or another,” leaving Laura feeling “as if she were a piece of property forgotten in the will” (10). Laura subsequently suffers the injustice of losing her family home of Lady Place to her brothers despite being its loving caretaker for more than ten years (32). Laura's “unearthly...contentment” (102) in *Great Mop* is born of her connection to the land but also of her freedom from the oppressive regime of her brother's household and patriarchal law. Warner invokes radical strains of English history—including

those powerful women who would later be called witches—to imagine a more egalitarian present.

This, despite the novel's eventual inclusion of "Satan" (an anomaly to which I will return), is the history Warner invokes: religious practice rooted in the land and in female power. Even in Laura's childhood there are hints of this alternative orientation to the divine. At her mother's funeral, hearing the sexton intone, "In the midst of life we are in death," Laura feels her body "encased in tremendous sunlight" and "seem[ing] to throb with an intense vitality, impersonally responding to the heat, scent and color" (38). She thinks to herself that "In the midst of death we are in life' . . . would be a more accurate expression of the moment" (38). Laura's response draws a contrast between the somber Christian church, with its preoccupation with the next world, and the potential divinity of the present, natural one, in which life and death are part of an endlessly renewing cycle. Warner's satiric judgement aligns with Laura's preference for this latter approach, for even before the narrative enters into a close third person, we read that the sexton's voice "sounded rather shameless taken out of church and displayed upon the basking echoless air" (38). The Christian preoccupation with shame is playfully inverted here, so that it is the fixation on death rather than life that receives censure. Religion as it is practiced by Laura's relatives is superficial and airless; Laura's sister-in-law, Caroline "would have made an admirable Mother Superior," a line that is revealed to be dryly humorous when readers learn that the only evidence of Caroline's "spiritual mind" is the meticulous neatness of her body linen. Showing Laura how she folds her own underwear, Caroline tells her solemnly that she finds her example in the Bible: "The graveclothes were folded in the tomb." (52). Warner satirizes convention, "religious" feeling, and domesticity, all of which are

associated with death rather than life, and which together offer a contrast with the unconstrained possibilities of nature.

It is worth noting that despite the references to Mother Superior, Warner does not appear to single out Catholicism, or any other Christian denomination, for particular critique. In her life in London, Laura is “darkly, adventurously drawn to see what services were like amongst Roman Catholics, amongst Huguenots, amongst Unitarians and Swedenborgians, feeling about this rather as she felt about the East End” (50). Warner’s critique is of blind adherence to convention, rather than any specific religious practice.

It is no coincidence that this adherence invariably supports patriarchal power structures, a fact reflected by the fact that it is Henry, not Caroline, who “banned the project” of Laura’s “adventure in churches” (ibid). Warner’s long-time partner Valentine Ackland offered an analysis of Warner’s attitude to religion which sheds light on her treatment of it in *Lolly Willowes*:

...she is to a great extent “allergic” to each & every form of religion, including its manifestations even in apparently unreligious individuals...She bears most patiently with my excursions into different Faiths, and is interested in many of them, and sometimes charmed by the outward trappings: but *always* because of their association with Man as a creative artist...the imagination that conceived the idea, the fancy that contrived the ritual, the social forces of the time, which conditioned this or that form of Faith or worship.<sup>55</sup> (qtd. in Harman 249)

This is an anthropological view, and Warner includes in *Lolly Willowes* a history of an alternate, yet overshadowed, female-centered religious tradition in order to illustrate that religion need not

---

<sup>55</sup> From a letter dated January 12, 1952 and copied into her own diary at Sylvia’s request (Harmon 249).

be inherently patriarchal. Hence Laura's contemplation of the henwife "who kings and queens resorted to...in their difficulties" and who "held their destinies in the crook of her arm, and hatched the future in her apron" (133), and "the spaewife, who sat on a creepie and stared at the smoldering peats till her eyes were red and unseeing" (133). There are also the Baba Yaga-like figures,<sup>56</sup> whom she calls simply "Russian witches," who "live in small huts mounted upon three giant hens' legs" (134). By contrast, Western, patriarchal Christian convention has become so ingrained in British society as to be reflected "even in apparently unreligious individuals," (Ackland qtd. in Harman 249), but Warner offers an alternative tradition in which women are the powerful and creative societal forces.

As I have demonstrated, Warner shows this nature-based spiritual practice to be woven seamlessly into the fabric of everyday life, whether one is ready to notice it or not. This mirrors the layers in Laura's own psychology: her blindness to her own unhappiness and to her true vocation, despite its presence in her life from an early age (which the reader knows through a pattern of foreshadowing). When Laura finally arrives in Great Mop, independent and self-possessed, the gap between her two psychic realities becomes clear to her as she walks through meadows blooming with cowslips:

She knelt down among them and laid her face close to their fragrance. The weight of all her unhappy years seemed for a moment to weigh her bosom down to the earth; she trembled, understanding for the first time how miserable she had been; and in another moment she was released...Tears of thankfulness ran down her face. With every breath she drew, the scent of cowslips flowed in and absolved her. (135)

---

<sup>56</sup> According to Jack Zipes, the Baba Yaga was "a malevolent/benevolent figure that harked back to a great pagan mother goddess and initiation rites" as well as "a majestic, dangerous figure of resistance to Christianity" that resulted in her demonization (*Irresistible* 70).

The language of Laura's epiphany and absolution are clearly religious in tone, though divinity in this moment takes the form of cowslips (notably plural and of the natural world) rather than a singular male god. Similarly, when Laura's nephew Titus has finally been chased away from her new home, "[a] religious silence filled the valley" (197). The divine, for Laura, aligns with a pre-modern, feminine and pantheistic religious model.

In many ways, this falls in line with a vision of the female pastoral that was especially popular with feminist critics of the 1990s, in which women live free from men and their sexual and domestic demands. Jane Marcus traces a "[f]emale literary nostalgia for the lost wilderness" which is "not only a longing for personal freedom, but a longing for a lost sisterhood under the protection of the goddesses" ("Wilderness" 136). Yet while Laura certainly finds like-minded women alongside her longed-for independence among the other witches of the countryside, Warner makes a point to describe Great Mop as not a "sociable village... Never had she seen so little dropping in, leaning over fences, dawdling at the shop or in the churchyard" (115) Yet this does not bother Laura, for her main goal in coming was not sisterhood, but the solitude and independence to discover "her own secret, if she had one" (117).

In addition, while Marcus describes Great Mop as an example of "an imaginary mythological wild space... sought by women as a source of creativity and selfhood in response to the phallogocentric city" ("Wilderness" 172), Warner actually complicates that presentation by showing strains of the conventional and domestic within the wild and pagan. Laura bakes bread and tends chickens, among other mundane chores, and when she goes to her first Sabbath, she finds it to be just as awkward as the balls she attended as a young woman. She can think of nothing to say to her first partner, and observes wryly that, being outside, "it was scarcely possible to praise the floor" (173). Though she does eventually find a dance partner whose

“fervor...annihilated every misgiving” (175), at first it seems that “[e]ven as a witch...she was doomed to social failure” (174). These details counter the kind of fetishization of the occult that MacDonald attributes to the 1920s. Rather than a utopian “gynocratic green world” (Marcus, “Wilderness” 172), Warner goes to lengths—often through dry humor, such as Laura’s “fatal comparison” of the Sabbath “to the Primrose League” (174)—to show that the pagan can be just as ordinary as the ordinary is pagan.

I am emphasizing Warner’s blurring of traditions (Christian and pagan, domestic and wild) here because it speaks to the potential power of “witches,” i.e. everyday women with powerful, independent minds (if not yet social or political power). If such women were not integral to society already, then their potential force would not be legible. Instead, *Lolly Willowes* works to show readers what is already there, as long as they are ready to see it. As Laura later tells Satan, “When I think of witches, I seem to see all over England, all over Europe, women living and growing old, as common as blackberries, and as unregarded” (211). The 1920s were a time when overt and dramatic suffragist activism gave the impression of a marked shift between “traditional” women and the young, militant “New Women” on the front lines of political warfare. Warner presents an alternative vision in which power and resistance (albeit psychological) has always been a part of women’s lives, even those who are “child-rearing, house-keeping, hanging washed dishcloths on currant bushes” (212). For her middle-class, more conservative readers, this would be an important step in bridging socio-political and cultural divides and showing the possibility of women “all over England” united in a more emancipated vision.

“[A] Skillful and Experienced Naturalist”: Warner’s Strategic Irony

This emancipated vision is potentially complicated by the novel’s ending, which finds Laura free from her family but under a different “ownership”—that of Satan. The last paragraph describes Laura feeling “peaceful and secure in [Satan’s] dangerous keeping” (222) as she prepares for night on a hillside: “She could sleep where pleased, a hind couched in the Devil’s coverts. . . . he would not disturb her. A closer darkness upon her slumber, a deeper voice in the murmuring leaves overhead—that would be all she would know of his undesiring and unjudging gaze, his satisfied but profoundly indifferent ownership” (222).

On the one hand, Satan might “own” her, but for all practical purposes Laura has achieved the independence that she sought. She has not been coerced into returning to her family, and she suffers no narrative punishment for her unconventional choices. Perhaps even more surprising for a popular novel of the time, the novel ends happily without succumbing to any traditional romantic tropes. The interaction between Satan and Laura, and her deliberate use of “undesiring” to describe his gaze, resists any reading of the alliance between the two as romantic or erotic. The spinster remains contentedly a spinster. However, Satan’s “ownership” of Laura—the novel’s literal last word—still rankles. Why would Warner, drawing from the history of Dianic cults, include a figure associated with demonizing these religious practices? Perhaps even more significantly, why end an unapologetically feminist novel with her protagonist content to live under a dominant male figure’s “ownership”? Satan seems an unnecessary patriarchal addition to a society of witches that appears to run perfectly well without him: beyond his mild interference with Laura’s nephew, there is no narrative evidence of the role he plays in any of the witch’s lives.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> Warner’s most influential source on witchcraft agreed. Harmon describes Warner taking tea with Margaret Murray, author of *The Witch Cult in Western Europe*: “Miss Murray. . . liked the character of Lolly, ‘though she was

*Lolly Willowes'* critics have had surprisingly little to say about this paradoxical presence of Satan in the text. A few, such as Per Faxnel, take his presence very literally, calling it "the most explicit and conspicuous literary example ever of programmatic Satanic feminism" (463). While Faxnel misses the ironic register in which Warner casts Satan, he does make the useful point that in Laura's childhood, it was her father (and the absence of her mother) who allowed Laura to reject conventional feminine pursuits, while women such as Caroline "are instrumental in imposing the demands of patriarchy on other members of their sex." Faxnel suggests that Satan can be read as "a charitable and asexual paternal figure, who gives Laura the same completely free rein her father did. Not all men are bad, the novel seems to say, and some can even be allies in the fight against the broader oppressive structures of which patriarchy is a part" (474). This is an important point, and aligns Warner with the other authors in this dissertation who recognize that the struggle for equality is not a dialectical opposition between the genders.

However, Warner's decision can best be fully understood by contextualizing the dry satirical wit that runs throughout the novel. Including "Satan" in her text is Warner's boldest satirical move. In indicating Satan's benignity, Warner makes clear the absurdity of the mainstream reaction to spinsters like Laura Willowes. Warner never shies away from using the name of this feared and reviled figure in Christianity, and even offers Laura's musings on him as "author of all evil...whose roots went down into the pit" (220). Yet the "Satan" of Warner's text never does anything more diabolical than provoke a humorous attack of bees, from which Laura's imposing nephew Titus emerges unscathed (and happily betrothed).<sup>58</sup> The impression

---

doubtful about my devil," as Warner wrote in a letter. In the same letter Warner mused, "I wish I was in her coven, perhaps I shall be" (65).

<sup>58</sup> Even the bees should be equated not with Satan's power, but with that of a female divinity. Marcus describes bees as "sacred to the mother goddess, not only because of the nourishing quality of their honey, but because of the minimal role the male plays in their community life" ("Wilderness" 139).

left by “Satan” in the book’s final pages is so understated that Laura could almost be speaking to herself, and indeed, she notes that it was a “pleasant conversation, though she had done most of the talking” (219-220). The narrative never gives any real power to this figure beyond the nominative, thus implying that even his designation as Satan and references to him “seeking to devour” Laura should be read as ironic. Warner comments here on the foolishness of all those who have projected hyperbolic evil onto the unknown or the different, whether that be Dianic cults or women who “only want [their] own way” (94) and thus are treated as witches.

Even the novel’s title hints at the way Warner plays with the idea of Satan and engages it to feminist ends. The full title, *Lolly Willowes; Or, the Loving Huntsman* not only indicates an equality between the two, but suggests that “Satan” is as much of a social construction as the imposed moniker “Lolly” (otherwise why not call the book “Laura Willowes”?). Conceptions of Satan are as hollow as the social conceptions that limit women, and vis versa. As Linda Hults observes, historically witchcraft was “a charge levied not against women in general but against women who were imagined as eluding or subverting patriarchal control... It was the very banality of misogyny, its complete incorporation into binary patterns of thought... that made the assertions of the demonologists plausible” (16). Warner presents that “banality of misogyny” as a projection originating out of fear, and exposes it as ridiculous.

### *Cabbages and Carnality: Warner’s Treatment of Sexuality*

Warner’s inclusion of Satan also helps to elucidate her treatment of men’s attempts to define and shape female sexuality, a treatment which is subtle but equally satiric. The first clue that her project includes a critique of the male construction of female sexuality comes in the first mention of religion in the Willowes’ family. Readers are told that for the Willowes, “Religion

was great-great-aunt Salome's prayer book" (47). This relative, Salome, is mentioned by name repeatedly in connection with the Willowses' family lore and history (her puff pastry "had been commended by King George III" (10)). The biblical figure of Salome, step-daughter of Herod, in addition to being a decidedly un-Christian figure, subsequently underwent an evolution within the male artistic imagination. In the Bible itself, Salome is described merely as "the daughter of Herodias [who] came in and danced, pleasing Herod and those dining with him" (Mark's 6:21–28).<sup>59</sup> Yet by the fourth century she was already being "vilified and rendered satanic" (Meltzer 16), and in the decades preceding *Lolly Willowses'* publication, she became a popular emblem for decadence and dangerous seduction, appearing as a *femme fatale* in the works of Oscar Wilde, Richard Strauss, Gustave Flaubert, and Joris-Karl Huysman.<sup>60</sup> The narrative sympathies of these depictions vary, but they share "the combination that makes Salome so tantalizing for many *fin de siècle* writers: the virgin and the devouress" (Meltzer 18).

These *fin-de-siècle* creations would have been familiar to *Lolly Willowses'* early readers. Choosing the provocatively charged name of "Salome" for Laura's relative, and then making her legacy the benignly domestic "puff pastry" offers a wry commentary on Salome's trajectory within the minds of men. Warner's revision—many-layered puff pastry, rather than many veils<sup>61</sup>—reminds us that Salome's status as an eroticized and sensationalized figure for male artists speaks entirely to the male imagination and general conception of women rather than to

---

<sup>59</sup> Garrity astutely observes that later in the novel, Laura "contrast[s] her version of domesticity with that of her great-great-aunt" when she bakes scones into the shapes of village people: "Warner here situates Lolly in a very different relation to the empire from that of the compliant Salome, repositioning her not as loyal subject but, in effect, as a subversive queen, re-creating and transforming the body politic as it pleases her" (165).

<sup>60</sup> See Wilde's play *Salomé*, Strauss's opera of the same name, and Flaubert's early historical novel *Salammbô*. Joris-Karl Huysman memorably describes some of the artistic incarnations of Salome in his 1884 novel *À rebours*, when he observes Gustave Moreau's rendition, *Salome and the Apparition of the Baptist's Head* (1876): "No longer was she merely the dancing-girl who extorts a cry of lust and concupiscence from an old man by the lascivious contortions of her body [and] spectacle of her quivering bosoms, heaving belly and tossing thighs; she was now revealed...indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning (54).

<sup>61</sup> A parallel first observed by Jessica Burstein.

her original presentation in the Biblical text. Just as earth-centered religions and their female deities were recast as Satanic activity by the patriarchal Christian church, so men desire to control and recast women's sexuality and power in monstrous and hyperbolic terms: a simple dancing girl becomes, in Joris-Karl Huysman's words, "a symbolic incarnation of world-old Vice...a monstrous Beast of the Apocalypse."

This critique of a patriarchal view of women is reinforced by Warner's satiric treatment of traditional female roles in courtship. We are told that when Laura is a girl, she declines convention in this area:

Being without coquetry she did not feel herself bound to feign a degree of entertainment which she had not experienced, and the same deficiency made her insensible to the duty of every marriageable young woman to be charming, whether her charm be directed towards one special object or, in default of that, universally distributed through a disinterested love of humanity. (26)

The tone of the passage is sardonic, but the point is a serious one. Women are both expected to charm and condemned if they charm too overtly or prolifically, as the example of the historical Salome makes clear. Even in the twentieth century, succeeding in feminine efforts means greater confinement; as Laura observes, "coming-out" socially means, "once the champagne bottles were emptied and the flimsy ball-dress lifted off the thin shoulders, *going-in*" (20, emphasis added). After all, "coming out" is a process intended to end in marriage, a state usually characterized by the taking up a domestic life inside the home. Instead, Warner demonstrates Laura's wish to remain free and part of the natural world through a telling use of personification and synecdoche: "Laura's legs were very slim and frisky, they liked climbing trees and jumping over hay-cocks, they had no wish to retire from the world and belong to a young lady" (20). By

describing it such, Warner emphasizes a woman's natural, embodied state as one of activity, freedom and exploration, most fully experienced *outside* the home rather than in.

Laura rejects the conventional expectations of women in modern life, which is tied to rote and passive activity. Stuck in London helping Caroline with the household duties, Laura has “a sensation that she was stitching herself into a piece of embroidery with a good deal of background” (43). Warner emphasizes that women's expected roles, be they married or single, serve to confine and immobilize. All this contributes to a sense of deadness in the city which Great Mop, brimming with life, stands in contrast to—a contrast Warner reinforces through her imagery. In the spring, Laura observes how “the wood pigeons moaned for pleasure on the boughs. Sometimes two cockbirds would tumble in mid air, shrieking, and buffeting with their wings, and then would fly back to the quivering boughs and nurse the air in peace again” (121). There are rhythms in the country, but they are a world apart from the mechanical rigidity of London, where a representative maid, drawing back a curtain, “looked out upon the day with no curiosity. She had seen it already” (44). Laura's interaction with her surroundings also stands in contrast to her deadening routine in the city. In Great Mop, she is free from the artificial calendar of modernity and can spend “whole days sitting in the woods” and take the time to “[a] her cheek against a tree and shut her eyes to listen” to the sap rising (121). Clearly, Laura's movement from the city to the country has put her in greater and more intimate touch with both herself and with the vitality of life.

However, Laura's greatest moment of self-discovery comes not in the natural world, but when she is out late one night and hears the sound of a goods train. This scene, perhaps more than any other, reveals Warner's unusual treatment of sexuality in her text. Laura has just observed the “different voices” of the wind and the firs that “seemed to chant some never-ending

rune,” before the goods train “by its regularity...dominated all the other voices” (122). What should be a mundane occurrence has a powerful effect on Laura:

It was scarcely audible, more perceptible as feeling than as sound, but by its regularity it dominated all the other voices...She began to feel defenseless, exposed to the possibility of an overwhelming terror...Though the noise came from an ordinary goods train, no amount of reasoning could stave off this terror. She must yield herself, yield up all of her attention, if she would escape. (123)

Warner describes its approach and the surrounding landscape in violently eroticized language, thus aligning the goods train—something violent, mechanical, and industrial—with a sexual force: Laura feels “defenseless” and like she must “yield herself.” The sound is described as “wicked” as it goes hunting, “unseen in the dark cleft of the hills” (123). Again the land is described in feminine—and in this case, sexual—terms (“dark cleft” suggests female genitalia), potentially vulnerable to a masculine force. However, Warner undercuts this traditionally gendered rendering with her description of Laura’s response.

Laura connects the sound to an earlier experience “in the goods yard at Paddington,” a railway station in London, where “she had almost pounced on the clue, the clue to the secret country of her mind” (123). This “country” is described as “desolate and half-lit, and [Laura] walked there alone, mistress of it, and mistress too of the terror that roamed over the blank fields and haunted round her” (123). This description, which comes in a more distant, and thus more authoritative, third person, contradicts the idea that the Devil—or anyone—is her master, despite the later possibility that the noise was him “triumph[ing] over [his] spoils that night” (209). Similarly, despite her “overwhelming terror” (123) Laura’s thoughts are described as sliding around “like a pack of hounds that have picked up the scent” (123). By making Laura’s thoughts

predatory, Warner complicates a simple dichotomy of (masculine) aggressor and (feminine) pursued, and readers are reminded that Laura is “mistress” of her own mind, whatever terrors it may hold.

The sexual force symbolized by the goods train is the opposite of the natural life-cycles associated with Great Mop and its attendant female powers. To Laura this force feels inescapable—it is tied inextricably to the mechanized, deadening force of convention that defined her life in the city, where she had been subsumed into her relatives’ lives “as a sort of extra wheel [who] soon found herself part of the mechanism, and, interworking with the other wheels, went round busily as they” (44). The shriek of the goods train is the escalation of that rote mechanization, what George Simmel called “a structure of the highest impersonality” in opposition to “autonomous” lives “characterized by vital impulses” (14, 13). Conventional domesticity might seem benign, but Warner’s description of it—a terrifying and relentless shriek—exposes a potentially violent and destructive force, one that threatens Laura intimately, hence the sexualized language.

However, the encounter proves to be a moment of triumph for Laura. At the climactic moment, after the moon has “plunged through the clouds,” the train “reached the top of the cutting, and with a shriek of delight...began to pour itself downhill” (124). Yet Warner immediately undercuts the rather vivid Freudian symbolism by making Laura respond, not with a sense of violation or rapture, but with amusement: “She smiled. It amused her to suppose [the train] loaded with cabbages” (124). As in so many of the texts in “It Girls and Old Maids,” dry wit serves as form of control, a neutralizing response to what could be a significant psychological threat. The threats Warner identifies—mechanization and male sexuality, both of which pose a threat to female autonomy—can prey on the psyche in a way both forceful and real,

and yet, looked at in metaphorical daylight, can also “shed all their midnight devilry” and be revealed as “very pure and vegetable” (124). When Laura leaves the hillside, murmuring “lovely!” to herself, it is with the feeling that “she had come nearer to catching [the secret] than ever before” (124). Yet I would argue that Laura already has, for “the secret” is the ability to master the otherwise overwhelming force of male sexuality by defining it on her own terms.

Additionally, Warner will present a different possibility for sexuality in general, one that operates outside a system of male construction. Such a reading contrasts with that of critics such as Robert Caserio who read Laura as not only celibate but “non-desiring” (qtd. in Garrity 164). Jane Garrity rightly refutes such an interpretation by identifying the erotic currents in Laura’s psyche and the “ample evidence of [her] susceptibility to corporeal pleasure” (164). As noted, Garrity’s larger argument is that Laura’s rural awakening and transformation are a coded presentation of lesbianism; more specifically, that “*Lolly Willowes* seeks to appropriate the primitive, and link it to homosexuality, within a British context” (147). In fact, we can—and should—recognize Warner’s presentation of desire as part of an even more radical project. In Laura, Warner presents a queer sexuality that expands beyond repressed homosexuality. There is certainly one notable moment of same-sex desire, an erotic dance with a “young slattern” named Emily at the Sabbath dance,<sup>62</sup> in which the two “whirled faster and faster, fused together like two suns that whirl and blaze in a single destruction” (175). Yet Laura’s erotic energies extend also to men (particularly a Mr. Saunter, who makes her feel like Eve in the Garden, “petitioned by an unladylike curiosity” [121]). Most importantly, they extend to nature itself, and herself in nature. Back in London, “she longed for the moment when she might stroke her hand” over the “sleek

---

<sup>62</sup> Though witches’ Sabbaths take different forms in historical accounts, Warner seems to follow the most common understanding of them as ritual gatherings featuring dancing and feasting, in which congregants would offer homage to the devil (de Blécourt 85). She does not include more of the more fantastical typical elements de Blécourt mentions, such as flying in on broomsticks or receiving “evil ointments made from children’s fat” (86).

flesh” of chrysanthemums, and once she is in the country, “wherever she strayed the hills folded themselves round her like the fingers of a hand” (129). Again and again, Laura insists on being alone, for it is alone in the woods that she feels at embodied and “released” from “all her unhappy years.” Her love for the countryside and woods is physical; she “[lays] her cheek against a tree,” and “[kneels] down among the [cowslips] and [lays] her face close to the fragrance” (135). Her actions and rich emotions toward the land echo that of lover’s. In fact, Laura initially feels a sharp jealousy when her nephew Titus joins her in Great Mop, for the woods and hills “were hers, they were all hers” and she fears he would “loll his great body over the hill-tops, or rout silence out of the woods” (157). Laura feels a lover’s possessiveness over her new natural surroundings—a much more radical manifestation of Eros than one limited to a person of the same sex.

Despite the instances of homoerotic impulses and language, it is important to understand Laura’s journey as different from a veiled coming out story, because even a lesbian romance falls into the kind of social scripts Laura wishes to free herself from. The spinster was already often perceived as lesbian by society writ large, to the degree that Sheila Jeffreys argues that “[a]ny attack on the spinster is inevitably an attack on the lesbian” (100). Lesbian narratives, even if comparatively rare (and/or disparaged), still reflected a comprehensible romantic model. Laura seeks no relationship with another person; the romance she experiences is potent but diffuse. To understand such an orientation (or lack thereof), we might look to Eve Sedgwick, who spoke of the need to “denaturalize any presumptive understanding of the relation of ‘hetero’ to ‘homo’ as modern sexual identities” (824) and offered “the masturbator”<sup>63</sup> as a disruptive alternative. She argues that “in the context of hierarchically oppressive relations between genders and between

---

<sup>63</sup> It is helpful to consider masturbation less literally than the term is usually used, though Sedgwick picked the term in 1991 in full awareness of the response it would provoke.

sexualities, masturbation can seem to offer—not least as an analogy to writing—a reservoir of potentially utopian metaphors and energies for independence, self-possession, and a rapture that may owe relatively little to political or inter-personal abjection” (821). In Laura’s life, and in Warner’s project, sexuality need not be dependent on a human subject of desire.

This returns us, finally, to names: in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, the nymph Daphne is turned into a Laurel tree to escape Apollo’s unwanted sexual pursuit. Thus, as a derivative of “Laurel,” the name Laura also bears the suggestion of exiting the heteronormative system to become one with the natural world. Accordingly, Laura imagines her future life “standing with upstretched arms among her fruit trees as though she were a tree herself” (79). Fairy tales have always offered the hope of transformation, and *Lolly Willowes* draws upon the genre to offer a tale both radically forward looking and rooted in a long-standing female history and tradition. The heroine of Winifred Watson’s novel will undergo a similarly powerful metamorphosis. This one occurs in a novel that embraces the pleasures of the middlebrow romance even as it challenges the presumptions on which many of its romances are built.

### ***Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* (1938)**

#### *A Spinster Fairy Tale*

*Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* is a Cinderella story, a phrase understood to mean a story of transformation. Specific details of the Cinderella story (the glass slipper, the carriage) change in different tellings; what remains vital to the tale is the spectacular change in circumstance for the deserving and beleaguered heroine. When Watson’s novel opens, Miss Pettigrew is friendless, wearing clothes not warm enough for the London winter, and “thin through lack of good food, with a timid, defeated expression and terror quite discernable, if anyone cared to

look” (2). Yet fate (another essential premodern and fairy tale element) would have Miss Pettigrew end up on the doorstep of Miss Delysia LaFosse, a nightclub singer in desperate need of someone to help her manage her revolving—and near-disastrously intersecting—cast of lovers. Through her involvement in Delysia’s life, Miss Pettigrew transforms before our eyes, discovering heretofore unknown brilliance in the realm of performance and improvisation. Soon her “dowdy carriage...ugly hair [and] sallow complexion” disappear “under the magic of ‘Du Barry’s’ expert owner and manager” (a cosmetologist friend of Delysia’s) (99), but it is Miss Pettigrew’s newfound confidence that offers the most exhilarating example of personal transfiguration.

In most versions of the Cinderella story, the transformation offered to Cinderella comes as an implicit reward for her passive and dutiful suffering of familial injustices. Perrault ends his version with a moral that has persisted in countless iterations: “Beauty in a woman is a rare treasure that will always be admired. Graciousness, however, is priceless and of even greater value” (182). In Watson’s version, however, it is Miss Pettigrew’s own wit and resourcefulness, her refusal to be impassive as she leaps to the defense of her new friend, that win over the two young women responsible for her sartorial—and societal—metamorphosis. Furthermore, and even more importantly, the change in Guinevere is internal as well as external, the result of knowing that her new friend “wanted her for herself alone” and that “[f]or the first time for twenty years she was herself, a woman, not a paid automaton” (20-21). The end of the novel finds the protagonist confident, aware of her own powers and wisdom—manifest most explicitly in her ability to bring about the marital engagement of Miss LaFosse and the worthiest of her suitors—and “radiantly” (233) happy. Her change is more temporally compressed than Laura Willows’ gradual transformation, but just as psychically liberating.

Watson's novel differs from the classic Cinderella story in another significant way; the familial antagonists in the form of wicked step-sisters and step-mother are nowhere to be found. Yet there is a surprising, if less obvious, parallel to these characters in *Miss Pettigrew*. In the canonical versions, Cinderella's new relatives hated her in part because she was a threat to their new domestic order. Yet as Warner makes clear in *Lolly Willowes*, so too did the older single woman threaten the idea of the social order—why else would there be so much resistance to her independence? Watson offers a diffused antagonist for Miss Pettigrew—society at large, and its attitudes toward spinsters—but the core factors are the same as those motivating Perrault's evil stepmother and sisters: fear sparks the desire to oppress, ostracize, and contain a threatening woman.

Furthermore, by not making Guinevere's antagonists female, Watson corrects one of the more negative trends in popular fairy tales—the long tradition of female villains. Warner observes that

In the most famous stories, monsters in female shape outnumber the giants and hobgoblins of “Tom Thumb” or “Puss-in-Boots” or “Rumpelstiltskin”, and certainly eclipse them in vividness and their lingering grip on the imagination: children are more thrilled than disgusted by the wolf who gobbles up Red Riding Hood, whereas they are repelled by the witch who fattens up Hansel to eat him. He exercises the beast's seductiveness, she is consigned to the flames of her oven to a loud sigh of relief, or even a hurrah. All over the world, stories which center on a heroine, on a young woman suffering a prolonged ordeal before her vindication and triumph, frequently focus on women as the agents of her suffering. (*Beast* 201-202)

Cinderella follows this trend, with nearly every version ignoring the father's role in "creating turmoil by choosing an inappropriate marriage partner" (Tatar 141) and failing to intercede on his daughter's behalf. Instead, "the foul deeds of his wife come to occupy center stage" (Tatar 141). Cinderella and Snow White are two of the most popular of fairy tales in Western culture, and these stories in which an older woman is cruelly jealous of a younger one (for her looks and/or her relationship with a central male figure) normalize this kind of antagonistic relationship, to the point where the stigma against stepmothers persists to this day, a fact which has "significant consequences on the stepmother's self-esteem as well as her family relationships" (Christian 27). This makes Watson's choice to deliberately and utterly subvert such an expected dynamic all the more meaningful.

Miss Pettigrew does, eventually, become an unconventional mother figure to Delysia LaFosse, yet despite Miss Pettigrew's intimate involvement in the younger woman's romantic life, Watson makes clear that their relationship is not one of rivalry. When Guinevere meets Nick, the most menacingly seductive of Miss LaFosse's three lovers, the older woman does have a moment of weakness in which "[h]er feminine susceptibilities simply turned traitor on her and she would have given ten years of her life for him to kiss her as he had kissed Miss LaFosse." She admits that for a moment she "almost did hate Miss LaFosse for her youth, her beauty, her charm. Not for long, though. She was not as stupid as all that" (28). The truth of the situation quickly asserts itself. Nick is "not good" (28) and, Guinevere, drawing upon her cinematic education, knows that men like him are "utterly callous when the moment's passed" (27). Her loyalties quickly return to, and remain with, Miss LaFosse.

It becomes apparent that Miss Pettigrew actually takes on two of the Cinderella story's key roles: she is the Cinderella figure herself, but also the godmother to the younger woman who

would usually occupy the role of heroine. Just as Perrault's fairy godmother saves the day for Cinderella, Miss Pettigrew gets Delysia out of a number of difficult situations, and just as the "good witch" replaces Cinderella's dead mother, Guinevere plays a clearly maternal role for Miss LaFosse. Delysia makes this explicit near the novel's end, telling her "I had no mother...you're just the kind I'd choose if I had my choice" (136). The divide between *It Girl* and *Spinster*, already blurred by Guinevere's transformation into an elegant "woman of fashion" (98) (with earrings that make her look "a little, well, experienced" [99]), is further dissolved by the elision of these fairy tale archetypes. This calls to mind Warner's similar blurring of archetypes; as Garrity observes, "Lolly—the 'barren spinster'—is associated with fruit and vegetation, images of ripeness and renewal" (177), imagery usually reserved for the archetypal maiden. Watson's novel, despite its adherence to middlebrow stylistic conventions, shares Warner's interest in "the juxtaposition of incongruities, its desire to subvert the reader's expectation regarding 'normalcy'" (ibid.).

This subversion extends not only to expectations regarding the roles a fairy tale heroine will take on (i.e. Cinderella versus maternal godmother), but how to understand those roles. Though fairy tale roles are nearly always fixed—the fairy godmother enters the narrative with her role clearly established—Guinevere, by contrast, learns how to be a mother figure to Delysia, often by interpreting her friends' crises through the lens of cinematic tropes—a point to which I will return. She has no maternal instinct in the traditional sense of wanting—or even liking—children (she finds them "frightening" and "horrible" [232]), yet the novel makes clear that this does not preclude her from embracing a role of emotional mentorship and support for a younger woman.

As such, it stands in contrast even to perhaps the only other feminist spinster fairy tale of the era, the short story “Spinster’s Rest,” by Clemence Dane, published in *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine* in 1927. In that story, a young, single typist desperately wants a child, and comes to adopt an orphaned boy with the help of a magical old woman. Louise MacDonald observes that “Spinster’s Rest” “champions the single woman’s right for a child, a feminist cause which would not be espoused until later in the century” (175). Yet the story also affirms normative values, such as when the heroine relates the “agonies of her dying youth” to the older woman: “I always thought I’d get married...I so looked to have my own [children]. One does. I know their names. I know how they look. I can feel their hands sometimes, touching me...” (60). By contrast, Watson’s humorous depiction of the “appalling offspring [who] tease, torment, terrify [and] harry [Miss Pettigrew’s] every waking hour” (3) rejects Dane’s heroine’s assumption that naturally “one does” want children, and by extension, the societal supposition that a single, childless woman must be unfulfilled. At the same time, Miss Pettigrew’s connection with Miss LaFosse shows that qualities associated with motherhood actually do not require offspring or children at all, but can be found in mutually beneficial relationships of guidance and support.

Through the process of helping Delysia, Miss Pettigrew gains confidence, finally learning, just as Laura Willowes does, to speak for herself. The novels’ emphasis on the power of speech is another feature which aligns them productively with the fairy tale tradition. Marina Warner writes that “The very word ‘fairy’ may be related to Latin *fari*, ‘to speak’, which gives *fata* (Italian for ‘fairy’) and *fée* (French) as well as the words for Fate in various languages: ‘that which is spoken’. Fairy-tales tell how people cope with the hand they are dealt, and they often give unusual emphasis to the power of speech to alter destiny” (“That Which is Spoken”). In *Lolly Willowes*, Laura, who begins the novel awaiting her relatives’ decision on where she

should go after her father's death, alters her own destiny when she at last finds her voice and informs those relatives of her plan to leave, despite her brother's strenuous objections and his confession that he has lost half her income in risky investments (94-95). Being told that what she wants is absurd, she counters, "It's only my own way, Henry" (94). Her speech to Satan at the end marks the successful end to her journey toward self-knowledge. When she asks him why he urges her to continue talking when he already knows her thoughts, he replies, "I encourage you to talk, not that I may know your thoughts, but that you may" (216). Laura's path to self-knowledge has been a decades-long one, and when she hears her own impassioned monologue she feels "as though she had been thrown into the air and had suddenly begun to fly" (213). By hearing her thoughts aloud, she feels their power to animate. In *Miss Pettigrew*, speech operates in a different, and more comic register, yet every incident of Guinevere altering the destiny of Miss LaFosse also involves her use of a powerful but previously unknown tool: her voice. She lies to Delysia's suitors and impersonates a former fearsome employer, speaking "in the most strident voice her throat could compass" (41). Her words to the favored suitor, Michael, near the novel's end spur him to victory over one of Delysia's other paramours, leading the amazed and grateful Delysia to admiringly call her "a witch" (220).

In both books, some of the most transformative moments of speech come in the form of angry outbursts. This is especially significant because of the intense pressure on women to avoid supposedly unfeminine expressions of emotion.<sup>64</sup> As Nicola Beaman observes of the 1920s and 30s, "it was so important to be nice...[T]o behave badly was a far, far greater crime than to leave

---

<sup>64</sup> Conversely, Laura Willowes finds herself freed in *Great Mop* from the expected feminine emotions of empathy; when her nephew Titus is attacked by bees, she observes his "roaring and damnings" from afar: "her vision has absorbed his violent pantomime without concerning itself to alarm her brain. She could not reason about what she had seen; she could scarcely stir herself to feel any curiosity, and still less any sympathy. Like a masque of bears and fantastic shapes, it had seemed framed only to surprise and delight" (197).

one's brain quietly to wither or to spin out an existence in which nothing marked the passing of the years except the passing seasons" (46). Yet both characters find not censure, but glory, in behaving "badly." When Laura Willowes, finally unable to take her brother's fatuous objections to her independence, bursts out "Have done with your trumpery red herrings!" we learn that "[s]he had never lost her temper like this before. It was a glorious sensation" (97). Similarly, a newly confident Guinevere Pettigrew stalks about a cocktail party "surging with pugnacious intentions. She wanted to do battle with some one for the sheer sake of downing them gloriously and proving her powers" (112). She then enters into a verbal sparring match with Miss Dubarry's lover (with whom the other woman has had a falling out) which brings about their reconciliation.

In Laura's case, the anger feels good because it validates a previously unfronted position of injustice. For Guinevere, it is a confirmation of an earlier suspicion that "every one had taken her inadequacy for granted" (7) and that she had been misjudged as weak. Alison Jaggar, in her influential article "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology" argues that "Western tradition has tended to obscure the vital role of emotion in the construction of knowledge" (151). Anger, what Jaggar calls an "outlaw emotion" due to its social unacceptability (166), provides both women knowledge not only of themselves, but of previously unquestioned injustices. Both Watson and Warner present these instances of anger in a humorous light (the verbal excess of the phrase "trumpery red herrings"; the image of Miss Pettigrew as a pugilist), yet the joke is not on the women. Instead, the element of levity has the effect of making the outlaw emotion appear less of a social threat for readers who might be looking for permission to explore their own unexamined and unsanctioned anger. Bettelheim, in defending violence in fairy tales, writes that "by denying access to stories which implicitly tell the child that others have the same fantasies, he is left to feel that he is the only one who imagines such things,"

which has the effect of making his own fantasies more frightening. However, “learning that others have the same or similar fantasies makes us feel that we are a part of humanity, and allays our fear that having such destructive ideas has put us beyond the common pale” (122). The presentation of women’s anger in these texts allows them to be viewed not only sympathetically, but with a kind of joy. Jaggar writes that “when certain emotions are shared or validated by others...the basis exists for forming a subculture defined by perceptions, norms, and values that systematically oppose the prevailing perceptions, norms, and values. By constituting the basis for such a subculture, outlaw emotions may be politically because epistemologically subversive” (165). Anger—and a realization of why one has the right to *be* angry—is often viewed as the first step in a larger social resistance to oppression. Yet anger, especially women’s anger, is still steeped in negative connotations, not to mention being at odds with a lifetime of conditioning toward conciliation. Warner and Watson show that anger can feel “glorious.”

*“An Enchanted World”: The Function of Cinema and Fantasy*

As previously noted, despite *Miss Pettigrew*’s initial and more recent popularity, the novel has garnered little critical consideration. As Alison Light says of interwar middlebrow culture in general, part of the lack of attention may be because its “apparent artlessness and insistence on its own ordinariness has made it peculiarly resistant to analysis” (qtd in Hammill 6). The novel’s narrative style, though instantly absorbing, displays no literary pretension, and despite the similarities with Anita Loos’ *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*—namely the diary format<sup>65</sup> and the focus on a young and sexually liberated socialite—it tries none of the experimental tactics which have contributed to the recent upsurge in scholars’ interest in Loos. The most in-

---

<sup>65</sup> Though not told in the first person, the novel is divided by time stamps such as “3.47am – ?” (227).

depth attention to Watson's novel to date comes from Faye Hammill, who includes it in her attempt to "illuminate the shifting meaning of the word 'sophistication' in the early twentieth century" (*Sophistication* 128). Hammill uses the novel to make the point that "[a]lthough sophistication is often understood in terms of a rejection of the sentimental," there are examples, such as *Miss Pettigrew*, in which "sophistication proves unexpectedly compatible with sentiment and romance" (ibid. 115). Hammill's argument is important in engaging the nuances of the role of sentiment and romance in modern literature; however, her treatment of Watson is cursory, and does not consider the novel's ambivalence toward traditional romantic narratives. While Watson does engage certain traditional tropes, she also draws attention to their constructedness, such as when Miss Pettigrew urges Michael to "sock" a rival suitor and then says she got the idea from Ethel M. Dell, a popular romance author hardly known for her realism. Such tropes cannot be taken for granted, and indeed, Watson uses the trope of the cinematic fantasy in connection with humor to both acknowledge women's need for imaginative refuges from an unfulfilling life, while also challenging popular cinema's limiting conceptions of ideal femininity.

Early on, we learn of Miss Pettigrew that "[i]n a dull, miserable existence her one wild extravagance was her weekly orgy at the cinema, where for over two hours she lived in an enchanted world peopled by beautiful women, handsome heroes, fascinating villains, [and] charming employers" (3). She thus joins a tradition of women who look to fictional worlds for escape from their everyday lives. There has been a long history of taking a critical position toward women who seek this kind of enchantment; even before Clark Gable and the advent of the "hypnotizing" silver screen, there were Emma Bovary's fatal romantic novels and fears over women's susceptibility to "fever reading" in nineteenth-century America.<sup>66</sup> Films, however,

---

<sup>66</sup> See *Fever Reading: Affect and Reading Badly in the Early American Public Sphere* by Michael Millner (2012).

brought heightened concern over women falling prey to the “hypnotic state,” as Aldous Huxley called it (qtd. in Frost, *Problem* 132)<sup>67</sup> induced by the silver screen. Though films were popular among most of British society (Annette Kuhn writes that Britain is believed to have “the highest annual per capita cinema attendance in the world” (58)), they were especially significant for women, who made up a higher percentage of the audience (Kuhn 60), and women were already believed to be more vulnerable to its supposedly narcotic effects. Rita Felski offers a gloss on women’s presumed susceptibility to fictional enchantment, whether in the form of fiction or cinema: “Susceptible and suggestible, lacking intellectual distance and mastery over their emotions, [women] are all too easily swept up in a world of intoxicating illusions. Aesthetic enchantment leads inexorably to ontological confusion, to a disturbing failure to differentiate between fact and fantasy, reality and wish fulfillment” (*Uses* 53). Even films themselves were critical of women who became too enraptured with them; Kuhn writes of several popular films of the 1930s in which “a preoccupation with cinema and film stars is seen as silly, even as damaging” (59).

Even so, Watson’s position toward Guinevere’s pleasure in the cinema is sympathetic—perhaps unsurprisingly, given that her novel invites the same kind of rapt and uncritical absorption. Her position also acknowledges that there were good reasons for women to look toward films for psychological reprieve. After all, when Guinevere is at the movies there are “no bullying parents, no appalling offspring to tease, torment, terrify, harry her every waking hour” (3)—in short, she finds relief from the miserable life her unmarried status has consigned her to up to now. Watson’s generous attitude toward fantasy and enchantment put her at odds with

---

<sup>67</sup> Huxley was not alone in such views. Laura Frost also offers the poet Bryher, writing for the magazine *Close Up*, describing a stupefied film audience: “To watch hypnotically something which has become a habit and which is not recorded as it happens by the brain, differs little from the drug taker’s point of view” (qtd. on 132).

highbrow authors of the period, who would critically interrogate fantasy's (and by extension, fiction's) power to "bewitch." In contrast, Watson effectively demonstrates why and how cinematic fantasy can serve a necessary psychological function.

Part of the criticism of cinema's escapism was that it would blur people's conceptions of reality, what Felski calls "an ontological confusion," yet Watson celebrates the blending of fantasy and reality that Miss Pettigrew's "weekly orgies" have afforded her. When Guinevere encounters cocaine in Delysia's possession, her response is born not of any real world knowledge, but cinematic associations, which Watson uses to humorous effect: "Drugs, the White Slave Traffic, wicked dives of iniquity, typified in Miss Pettigrew's mind by red plush and gilt and men with sinister black mustaches, roamed in wild array through her mind" (23). Her associations spark in Guinevere a response also born of filmic tropes, though not of the typical woman's role. Though first she feels that she "must fly before she lost her virtue" soon "her common sense unhappily reminded her that no one, now, would care to deprive her of that possession. It was Miss LaFosse who was in danger. She must save her!" (23). Miss Pettigrew takes on the male hero's role, and though the moment is comic in part because of her exaggerated response, it shows a subtle subversion both *of* the filmic tradition and born of it: Miss Pettigrew will play the (usually male) heroic role of saving the younger woman, something she continues to do throughout the novel. Thus Watson shows that though the cinematic tropes may be ingrained, they are also mutable in the imagination.

Despite Watson's narrative sympathy for cinematic fantasy, she also challenges some of its more conservative and limiting effects within British culture. The most significant of those involves presentations of sexuality within British films of the time. Kuhn observes

a very striking finding concern[ing] paradigms of femininity embodied in the personae of Britain's favorite female stars, all of which are conspicuously lacking in attributes of overt, adult, sexuality. While the more glamorous Hollywood stars of the 1930s found little favor in Britain (according to some contemporary surveys, the raunchy Mae West was positively detested), female performers who were, or appeared to be, prepubescent were especially highly rated by British filmgoers. (61)

This meant literal girls, like Shirley Temple, but also the “big sisterly” and “asexual” Gracie Fields (Kuhn 60-61). Though the 1930s saw increased openness to female sexuality and pleasure within a marriage, such openness did not extend to unmarried women (Beauman 134). Even erotically charged romance novels distanced themselves from everyday British women by “set[ting] their sexual adventures in remote surroundings” and using a vocabulary “imbued with moral overtones” (Beauman 124).

In contrast, Miss LaFosse, the novel's stand-in for an adored movie star (each of Miss LaFosse's frocks are “fit to feature a film star” [61]) is highly sexual, a fact which the humor of the novel not only condones, but delights in. When Miss Pettigrew first meets her, fresh from bed with one of her three lovers, Miss LaFosse “still wore the gorgeous, silk *négligé*” (which Miss Pettigrew recognizes from “*everyone* on the films” [3]). The older woman thinks,

“No wonder Phil wants to take her back to bed.” Then blushed a painful, agonizing red of aghast shame that such a thought could even touch the fringe of her virgin mind. And then...and then she thought, “*Miss LaFosse*. It couldn't be.”

“There,” said Miss LaFosse solicitously. “You've gone all red. It's cooking over a hot stove. That's why I've never cultivated the art. It simply *ruins* the complexion.” (8)

The gentle humor in this scene is directed toward Miss Pettigrew's shock, which is presented as old-fashioned. Miss LaFosse's misunderstanding of her response is comic in itself, but also reinforces Delysia's distance from a woman's traditional, domestic past-times.

Delysia's overt sexuality and free-spirited attitude is much more in line with American It Girls than the British stars admired by Miss Pettigrew's readers. One could easily imagine her making the remark attributed to American It Girl Mae West (and one especially appropriate to the fairy tale genre): "I used to be Snow White, but I drifted." Delysia is a new kind of It Girl, one who not only engages in a freer form of sexuality, but enjoys it for more than the social or material benefits it might confer (thus setting her apart from the Loreleis of literature). Her attitude has an effect on Miss Pettigrew, as well. As Humble observes, the "feyness and frivolity" of the middlebrow novel "allowed it to explore new gender and sexual identities which were otherwise perceived as dangerously disruptive of social values" (*Feminine* 5). And indeed, Guinevere's time with Miss LaFosse quickly leads her to realize "I've lived too secluded a life...I've not appreciated how my own sex has advanced. It's time I realized it." Though Delysia does end up engaged, both she and Michael agree that "domesticity is dead" (222), and there is no sense of the young woman being punished for her "intimate way of being nice to men" (85). Just as sexuality is part of Guinevere's journey of self-discovery, sexual freedom has allowed Delysia to feel sure that she has chosen the right man.

Both film and the middlebrow novel were means by which women, especially working and middle-class women, could navigate new possibilities for identities—to find new and more liberating scripts. Just as fairy and folk tales have been considered a literary form for common people, Watson's novel spoke to those women might describe their lives as Watson did her own: "perfectly ordinary and uninteresting" (qtd. in Twycross-Martin "Introduction" vii). In her

introduction to Watson's novel, Twycross-Martin describes it as one of her mother's favorite books, not just because it was "an escape into laughter and joyful fantasy, but because Miss Pettigrew, middle-aged, poor, and a governess" mirrored Twycross-Martin's own single and financially struggling mother. In this brief portrait, the necessity of fairy tales of a different sort is immediately apparent, especially ones in which the question is not "When will my prince arrive?" but, in Miss Pettigrew's words, "How do we know what latent possibilities of achievement we possess" (Watson 7). The novel's humor and light touch, what Tracy Chevalier calls "a perfect mix of ...substance and froth" shows it to provide psychic reprieve, like the films it celebrates, while also shedding the more repressive elements of the romantic genre.

Despite its lightness, the novel does not ignore the material reality that determines Guinevere's life, nor does it shy away from the barer facts of poverty. Near the novel's end, the reality that her day with Miss LaFosse has ended and she has no money or employment descends upon her, and, because it is too late to wake her landlady (whom she cannot even pay), "she would have to walk the streets for the rest of the night" (215). Miss LaFosse instead takes her back in, and even offers her a job, but the threat of destitution for women for whom "there are not many of [their] kind of post[s] these days" (1) is real. Though Watson grew up middle class, her father's shop catered to the working class, and those who felt these material constraints were real to Watson in a way they were not to authors who moved in a more isolated class stratum. Indeed, Laura Willowes could never have found her desired independence without the help of her inheritance (diminished though it may have been by her brother's investments). Her response to her family's doubts, that "nothing is impractical for a single, middle-aged woman with an

income of her own” (95), may be inspirational, but for those women without an income of their own, practical realities were often overwhelming.

Watson, despite the fairy tale elements of her novel, conveys a sympathetic awareness of the plight of single women who had to find work in one of a few limited and often thankless positions, often for little financial reward. This awareness also foreshadows the material constraints that would end Watson’s own career. Though she had been finding success with her novels, WWII brought the destruction of her home, and with it, her writing career. Watson and her family were forced to move into the already-cramped home of her husband’s mother, and, as she told Twycross-Martin, “One cannot write if one is never alone” (qtd. in “Obituary”). There is a painful irony to the fact that the material conditions which Miss Pettigrew so delightfully transcends were in fact responsible for the end of Watson’s own writing career. The “room of one’s own” that Woolf imagined, the simple freedom to “sit in doorways and think” (Warner 213) that Laura Willowes so fiercely demands, would, for many years, still remain a fantasy for most ordinary women. Nevertheless, *Lolly Willowes* and *Miss Pettigrew* demonstrate the power—indeed, the necessity—of such fantasies.

## **Conclusion**

The domestic arts have a long tradition of hiding revolutionary force. As Karen Rowe argues so convincingly, the womanly act of “spinning a yarn” has an ancient history of speaking truth to power. In Ovid’s tale of Philomena, a young woman is able, through her weaving alone, to communicate the story of her rape despite her attacker’s brutal attempt to silence her by cutting out her tongue. As Rowe writes, “Ironically, Philomela, the innocent woman who spins, becomes the avenging woman who breaks her enforced silence by simply speaking in another

mode— through a craft presumed to be harmlessly domestic, as fairy tales would also be regarded in later centuries” (397). So too with certain middlebrow texts, such as those considered in these chapters. From “Great Mop,” a name that first suggests household chores before revealing itself to be more closely aligned with a witch’s broomstick, to Miss Pettigrew drawing inspiration from—and then emerging triumphant from—her life as a governess, Warner and Watson embrace the strands of the domestic and show them to be full of potential.

Rather than viewing the middlebrow’s association with domesticity, leisure, and femininity as handicaps to its literary respectability, we should view it as in line with a long tradition of feminine storytelling in which obfuscation—both accidental and strategic—is inherent. The arguments of *Lolly Willowes* and *Miss Pettigrew*—that women could be the agents of their own transformation, that conventional religious and moral dictums only serve to stifle and confine, that sexuality could be open to radical reinterpretation—might, under other treatments, provoke resistance or hostility in their readers, but Warner’s and Watson’s styles encourage openness. Through their use of humor, as well as conventions of both fairy tales and of the feminine middlebrow, Watson and Warner create for their readers a new discourse in which pleasure is not at odds with new, more liberated visions of womanhood.

## CHAPTER THREE

## Towards a New Feminist Satire:

Barbara Pym's *Excellent Women* and Elaine Dundy's *The Dud Avocado*

**Introduction**

The period following the second world war is rarely considered one of sustained progress for feminism, either in Britain or the United States, and this final chapter considers two novels that seem, at first, to reflect their times. Barbara Pym's *Excellent Women* (1952), which Karl Miller calls “‘of the Fifties’ to a degree that was barely understood at the time,” follows the spinster Mildred Lathbury as she brews tea, volunteers at the church jumble sale, and sweeps the landing so as to better observe her new neighbors. Pym's narrator finds herself involved in these neighbors' domestic drama, for, as she tells us on the first page, “an unmarried woman just over thirty, who lives alone and has no apparent ties, must expect to find herself involved or interested in other people's business” (5). Elaine Dundy's *The Dud Avocado* (1958) offers the story of Sally Jay Gorce, a free-spirited American on her own at last in Paris, where she drinks champagne at the Ritz with her married lover and pursues fame on the stage and screen, before eventually becoming engaged to a successful photographer. Mildred and Sally Jay, a “fussy” (Pym 10, 161) unmarried woman and a “tart” (Dundy 9), as they do not hesitate to describe themselves, hardly seem from these descriptions to challenge conventional assumptions about a single woman's expected roles as spinster or sexpot.

Certainly the prevailing mindset of the 1950s was that women had achieved their desired rights and liberties and that the wars—of both sex and nation—were over (Wilson 2). As Martin Pugh observes, “The story of British feminism from the Depression through the 1950s is one of continued decline, and the cult of domesticity returned with a vengeance as Britain began to

emerge from years of wartime privation” (162). The United States saw a similar trajectory, for the upheaval of war brought in its aftermath a desire for a return to social as well as national stability (Yellin 36). War might have brought a shift in gender roles as women were called to factories and field hospitals, but that time had passed. In the minds of many, the time for women to play at being men was over.

It seems fitting, then, that Pym’s spinster and Dundy’s *It Girl* would more exaggerated in their presentation of feminine roles. However, a closer look at these novels and their narrators reveal subversion guised in the trappings of conventionality. In this way, both novels are indeed “of the 50s,” for despite the decade’s cultural pressures and set-backs, the 1950s contained currents of feminist resistance that would help enable the more radical efforts to come. Elizabeth Wilson describes the “myth” (2) of the death of feminism in these years. In fact, women were far from resigned to their subordination, though prevailing “[i]deologies constructed a confusion in which it became difficult to know how to voice these feelings of oppression” (3). She quotes Bridget Brophy, who, in 1966, compared women to “animals in a modern zoo,” where former “cage bars of legal disability had simply been replaced by ‘zones of fierce social disapproval’” (qtd. in Wilson 3). These “bars” were all the harder to challenge because they were invisible. This meant that a clarifying feminist perspective was all the more important, even if it must be subtle to find purchase in the social climate. Such work did continue in the years between WWII and the 1960s—less dramatically, but persistently nonetheless.

Despite the initial impression made by their narrators, Pym and Dundy were, in fact, exemplars of this kind of intellectual and creative labor. Attention to their first person narrators reveals a more satiric and comically sophisticated project than is immediately apparent. Both authors satirize gendered conventions, but despite their narrators’ exaggerated presentations of *It*

Girl and spinster, the joke is never on the women. Although Mildred and Sally Jay seem at times to reflect stereotypes around their types, Pym and Dundy employ close, sympathetic, and sharply intelligent narrative perspectives that preclude narrative judgement. Through their narrators' honesty, self-reflection, humor, and (paradoxically) their self-mockery, these authors take possession of the critique and disable what could otherwise invite patriarchal censure.

In doing so, they look forward to future forms of feminism. While second-wave scholars and activists of the 1970s brought a necessary awareness of those structures—social, political, and psychological—that enabled patriarchal oppression, they did so largely by wholesale rejection of said structures. In contrast, Pym and Dundy demonstrate what has now become *de rigueur* among today's funny feminists: an elasticity in self-conception that refuses to define itself either by *or against* societal standards, for to define only in opposition can be just as limiting. I offer this not to diminish the achievements of second-wave feminism or create a false binary—today's feminist landscape would not be possible without the radical efforts that preceded it. Yet it is still important, in tracing a history of women's resistance, to recognize that this history is not one of neat linear progression. In fact, seemingly regressive periods such as the 1950s actually contained resistance in manifest forms, some of which would reflect attitudes that feel surprisingly modern. For just as the feminism of the 1990s would remind us that a woman could be independent and empowered and still enjoy men and sex, Sally Jay, alone in Paris, feels “shivers of excitement” thinking of “sex and sin; of [her] body and all the men in the world who would never sleep with it” (32). And just as twenty-first century feminists would reclaim domestic arts such as knitting as well as the “spinster” label,<sup>68</sup> we find Mildred contentedly falling asleep to cooking manuals and reflecting, “not for the first time, how pleasant it was to be

---

<sup>68</sup> See Kate Bolick's *Spinster: Making a Life of One's Own* (2015).

living alone” (19). Pym and Dundy anticipate more inclusive feminisms, ones which would not only fight against patriarchal strictures, but against any narrow definition of modern womanhood.

Toward this end, Pym and Dundy pair their satiric humor with plots and narrative styles that differ from the previous authors in this dissertation. They move away from Anita Loos’ cartoonish, mercenary *It Girl* and Rebecca West’s exaggeratedly romantic, idealistic spinster to create characters that are more complex and psychologically realized. Both Mildred and Sally Jay have ambivalent relationships to romantic love, neither writing it off completely nor assuming it will be uncomplicated or transcendent. Like Sylvia Townsend Warner and Winnifred Watson, Pym and Dundy offer new possibilities and more emancipatory scripts for single women, yet they do so without engaging the realm of fantasy, as Warner and Watson do in their literary visions. Instead, Pym’s spinster narrator is much like thousands of Britain’s actual “excellent women,” by which the book means those unmarried women who “have jobs and careers and live in bed-sitting rooms or hostels” and, perhaps, “become indispensable in the parish” (129). These women rarely make it into the pages of fiction,<sup>69</sup> but in Mildred Latham, Pym shows us a woman who is integral to her community as well as an individual worthy of attention in her own right. In offering Mildred’s complex and sometimes contradictory inner life, rich with insight and wit, Pym offers a new model of self-conception for women who might otherwise accept a view of themselves as superfluous and expendable. In *The Dud Avocado*, Sally Jay’s narrative celebrates her life of freedom (sexual and otherwise) and adventure without discounting its share of setbacks, pratfalls and pain.

---

<sup>69</sup> Agatha Christie’s *Miss Marple*, a remarkably successful amateur sleuth, provides a notable exception in popular literature, though not one likely to reflect the reality of many single women’s lives.

However, the events of either novel would hold less feminist potential if not for their authors' strategic uses of humor and their destabilizing engagement with their narrators' identities as spinster and *It Girl*, respectively. Despite Mildred's near diametric opposition to Sally Jay in type (as domestic and stationary as the younger woman is free-wheeling), Pym and Dundy share an approach in using their narrators' social types to their narrative advantage. Mildred's descriptive tone is dry and restrained, the humor often manifesting in understatement and the contrast between her socially acceptable responses and her more critical inner monologue. In addition, Pym's spinster, used to being invisible, has a "talent for observation" (70) and can partake in situations more inconspicuously. By not disrupting the quotidian flow of everyday events—a church jumble sale, a tea with arguing spouses—she is better equipped to defamiliarize them, such as when she observes, "I suppose married people get so used to calling each other 'darling' that they never realize how false it sounds when said in an annoyed or irritable tone" (52). Sally Jay is as loud as Mildred is soft, her descriptions purposefully exaggerated and often outlandish. As such, she takes the path of the archetypal *It Girl* in using attention to her advantage. When her married lover (whom she is trying to leave) tells her patronizingly, "you must not be allowed to go drifting from one affair to another" (44), she tells her readers, "this was the second time that day that I'd been cautioned against drifting. Three times and I'd get a parking ticket" (45). Sally Jay flirtatiously confides in the reader, challenging the condescension of an older man and creating an alliance with her audience that holds even through her more questionable adventures. Though differing in their execution, both authors exploit the tropes of conventional female types so as to challenge their simplicity and limitations.

Pym and Dundy also engage self-deprecation in such a way that defies both assumptions about their narrators and doubts about self-deprecation's feminist potential. With Mildred, Pym

offers a spinster narrator who is fully aware of how she is perceived—indeed, she fixates on her spinster status to the point of satire, especially considering she is only “just over thirty” (5)—yet she is not at the mercy of such perceptions. Rather, her preoccupation draws attention to the failings of a social system that patronizes and dismisses older single women, while her sardonic narrative asides prevent any reading of her as stereotypically mild-mannered and ineffectual. So too with Sally Jay, who undercuts any impression of her as simply a ditzy flirt with her satirical commentary—one trained both on other characters and the romantic tropes with which she willingly engages. Both characters offer narrative commentary that unsettles any typical understanding of self-deprecation as reinforcing a patriarchal view of women. In their playful engagement with their social roles, both narrators dismantle the very stereotypes on which they depend.

Much of Pym’s humorous critique is directed at specific social relations, marking it as that subgenre of satiric novels, the comedy of manners. Greenberg explains that comedies of manners “provide unique qualitative insight into a culture’s values by registering what Lionel Trilling called ‘small actions’: nuances of diction, tone, and gesture. But the smallness of these actions can look like pettiness, and pettiness provides fuel for satire” (*Cambridge* 165). I will return to this in my discussion of *Excellent Women*, yet it is worth noting that Pym also follows in the classic tradition of satire in asking readers to reconsider assumptions not only about “small actions,” but also regarding some of the more universal values that would usually go unquestioned, an effort aided by Mildred’s outsider identity as spinster.

A representative example can be found in a scene of small talk with her new neighbor. Mildred tells readers, “Platitudes flowed easily from me, perhaps because, with my parochial experience, I know myself to be capable of dealing with most of the stock situations or even the

great moments in life—birth, marriage, death, the successful jumble sale, the garden fête spoiled by bad weather...” (6) The structure of the sentence changes it from simple description— of stock situations on the one hand and great moments on the other— into an instance of rhetorical anacoluthon. Because Pym ends the internal clause with “great moments in life” and starts the list with “birth, marriage, death”, the reader expects more such momentous events to follow, yet instead are given the humorously mundane examples of the successful jumble and the ruined party. The logic of the sentence asks that we either consider the unjustified weight Mildred’s society puts on minor happenings, or question the actual importance of orthodox events. Pym pokes fun at those who would consider a ruined party overly consequential, but also, thanks to Mildred’s position outside the status quo, suggests that a marriage or birth is also a “stock situation,” despite how exceptional it might feel to those involved.

Like Pym, Dundy turns an anthropological eye on assumed social attitudes and relations, yet her narrator also turns that gaze upon herself, humorously evaluating her attraction to misogynic ladies’ men and the “props” that support her own romances, without which they would “collapse like a house of cards” (51). What might be read as light self-deprecation actually reveals itself to be a critical commentary on how both men and women partake in a flawed set of gendered scripts, while also stripping the overarching system of gender relations of some of its psychic power.

That Sally Jay so effectively lampoons these scripts is in part what marks *The Dud Avocado* as operating in the picaresque mode of satire. These novels follow their hero—or in this case, heroine—on “sundry adventures traveling from place to place” and emphasize “the unpredictable and unscripted nature of experience” (Greenberg, *Cambridge* 187). For this is the larger point of Sally Jay’s many triumphs and travails—to shake free of the rote confines of

modern experience. In fact, she is drawn to the stage and screen because, paradoxically, she finds authenticity in these mediums' overt acknowledgment of the ubiquitous performance of life. As she reflects after taking a role in a play, "I found I liked acting...I even liked having to be at the same place at the same time. I mean, the question actors most often get asked is how they can bear saying the same things over and over again night after night, but God knows the answer to *that* is, don't we all *anyway*, we might as well get paid for it" (130). Sally Jay's self-awareness distances her from heroines who unthinkingly adhere to expected tropes.

### **"A Positive Rather Than a Negative State": New Visions of Spinsterdom and Sexual Liberty**

Let us return, then, to the spinster and the It Girl. Pym's approach to the spinster type is particularly significant because it differs so markedly from the treatment of spinsters outside of this dissertation, even when they are created by the most sympathetic authors. Consider Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill" (1920), in which the title character's fleeting moment of pleasure petting her fox fur wrap is destroyed by the mocking laughter of two young lovers. The story ends with her returning the fur to its box and imagining that she can hear "something crying" (208). Though created with pathos, by the story's end the old woman remains pathetic. Then there is Miss Fisher, the spinster of Elizabeth Bowen's *The House in Paris* (1935), who shares a common fate of literary spinsters in losing her own chance at love, only to wither away as an unpaid servant to mother. Often spinsters such as these work to demonstrate patriarchal injustice, as the sadness of their situations serve to critique the structures that would create them,

but presentations of an older single women's lives not marked by tragedy are in short supply.<sup>70</sup> As Maroula Joannou notes, "[t]he specter of loneliness" hung over the spinster in women's writing of the first half of twentieth century, as well as "the reality of interminable waiting for a husband who never quite materializes...and for a life that consequently never quite begins" (83). In contrast, Pym's spinsters have made full and rewarding lives for themselves, even if these lives might look quiet by the standards of romantic fiction. Yet as Miller writes, while Pym's novels frequently involve themes of romance, "bed-sitter fantasies of the redeeming male are for the most part, though not entirely, smiled at" ("Barbara Pym's Hymn"). As in Mansfield's stories, Pym's use of spinsters critiques the heteronormative system, but it does so differently, by showing rigid conventionality (and its accompanying attitudes toward women) to be ridiculous, but hardly a psychological death sentence for a woman of resilience and wit. Instead, readers are presented with a woman's unmarried status as it is described by Mildred: "a positive rather than a negative state" (Pym 190).

The younger, sexually adventurous single woman has obviously fared differently in literature, but even when celebrated, her psychological rendering often remains superficial. Watson's Delysia LaFosse offers few surprises: she is romantic, ambitious, good-hearted, and "breath-takingly lovely" in her silk *négligée* (8). When it comes to Loos' *It Girl*, although I have advocated for reading Lorelei Lee as a more complex narrative creation, I would certainly draw the line at suggesting that a psychologically realistic portrait emerges from Loos' bright, sometimes broad, comic strokes. Many of the more serious portraits, even when not condemning women for their behavior, still find themselves haunted by the specter of the nineteenth century,

---

<sup>70</sup> The few exceptions beyond those considered in this dissertation include *Miss Mole* by E.H. Young (1930) and Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), both of which offer spirited and irrepressible older single women in their title characters.

with evidence of a woman's sexual liberty inextricably bound with elements of tragedy. In Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* (1945), the suffering of the formerly exuberant, sexually liberated Sally Bowles' finally becomes apparent as she recovers from an abortion after the disappearance of her lover; Hemingway's Lady Brett Ashley battles despair amid her love affairs and moves toward redemption only when she decides that "it makes one feel rather good deciding not to be a bitch" (249). Dundy, in contrast, offers both a fully realized and sexually-liberated socialite, one who faces no narrative judgement for her behavior.

That Dundy's novel, which achieved best-seller status, did not receive more censure for its sexual exuberance is startling. In the first chapter, Sally Jay recounts in no uncertain terms the orgasm she experiences at the mere touch of her acquaintance Larry, with whom she has just become infatuated: "You know how it is. Some people can hack and hack away at you and nothing happens and then someone else just touches you lightly on the arm and you come...yes, I mean that's what happened. I mean I came" (20). The moment is as narratively significant as it is startling, for Sally Jay's pursuit of Larry leads to many of her subsequent adventures and mishaps. In a 2007 interview, Dundy reflected on the peculiar silence around this scene: "Nobody has ever talked about Sally Jay coming," she said, pointedly looking [interviewer Steffie Nelson] in the eye. "I find that interesting that they don't...That's really what holds Sally Jay [to Larry] for a very long time. It's completely sexual" (Nelson). In her autobiography *Life Itself*, Dundy is equally matter-of-fact about her own unfettered relationship with sex. She writes openly about her erotic life, such as the pleasure she found in losing her virginity after telling a married acquaintance bluntly, "I'm a virgin...and I don't want to be" (61). *The Dud Avocado* reflects Dundy's personal philosophy that female desire, including the desire for casual sex, is something to be approached directly and without apology.

Even so, for a novel published in 1958, the role of sex in Dundy's narrative—a source of pleasure and fixation for Sally Jay, but also stripped of much of its social and psychological baggage—is surprisingly progressive. Sally Jay describes how when she first started sleeping with the married Teddy, she used to tally the number of times they went to bed together on her steamed-up mirror. A few months later, the allure of Teddy has worn off, and Sally Jay again finds herself in front of the fogged surface: “I find I always have to write *something* on a steamed mirror. Only this time, I couldn't think of anything to write. So I just wrote my own name, over and over” (35). The moment provides a fitting metaphor for the novel's overall conception of sex—ephemeral, and overwritten by more pressing questions of self-formation.<sup>71</sup> When urged by Teddy to explain why she lost her virginity to him if she was not in love with him, Sally Jay struggles to come up with a suitable version of the truth. She dismisses one of her reasons, that she liked his body, as “[t]oo something or other” (43), and finally gets “as close to [her] *raison d'être* as [she] ever [had]”: “I did it because it seemed to be the glamorous thing to do at the time. It was my *ideal* of glamour” (43). The answer leaves Teddy defeated, yet for the reader, the response is liberating. In her insouciance, Sally Jay strips sex of its oppressive cultural weight.

Equally modern in sensibility is Sally Jay's defiant admission—to humorous effect—of enjoying decidedly *unfeminist* treatment by men. Becoming impatient with Teddy's heartbreak, she compares him unfavorably to Noel Coward's character in the 1935 film *The Scoundrel*, whom she calls “this great Wolf.” Sally Jay recounts the appeal of this character as he rejects a love interest:

At one point when his latest victim comes around and begs him on her knees to take her back, he removes the boutonniere from the lapel of his dinner jacket and murmuring

---

<sup>71</sup> Jessica Burstein has suggested to me that Dundy could be making a joke about masturbation—an interpretation less metaphorically significant, but radical in its acknowledge of female pleasure. It is also funnier.

Forgive-me-dear-for-stooping-to-symbolism, he tosses the flower into his highball and drowns it with a squirt of the soda syphon. So you know what I mean? *That's* the sort of thing I brought myself up on. I mean that's more like it (48).

In the tradition of twenty-first century female comics, Sally Jay demonstrates a self-awareness of the scripts and the sexist norms on which she has been raised, which result in the paradoxical appeal of characters like “the Wolf.” Yet her humorous exaggeration of the appeal of what we might call romantic misogyny also serves to call its power into question. If women are in on the game that men like the Wolf play, they are active participants rather than passive victims. Here and elsewhere, Sally Jay exposes romantic interactions between the sexes as fodder for satiric wit rather than forces of emotional life or death.

However, despite her playful treatment of many of her relationships, Sally Jay also experiences sadness and regret at some of her choices, such as leaving the young and sensitive painter Jim Breit to follow Larry on an ill-fated vacation. When she learns of Jim's engagement to her friend Judy, her grief is real, even if she is angry at herself for feeling it (197). Although characters in satiric novels “tend to be two-dimensional or cartoonish” (Greenberg, *Cambridge* 162), this is not the case in either Pym's or Dundy's novels, a fact that, along with the other novels in this dissertation, asks us to reconsider the range and possibilities of the satiric mode. Mildred faces disappointment but demonstrates humor and resilience; Sally Jay is by turns despondent and exuberant. She is also flighty, sex-obsessed, vulnerable, and cynical all at once. Both characters, in other words, are very recognizable modern women.

### Self-Deprecation Unsettled

Though Pym's depiction of Mildred's emotional life reads as modern, the community she belongs to, with its jumble sales and calls to Evensong, is firmly rooted in an England of the past. The book's primary conflict, in fact, is not between characters, but between an antiquated England and a woman who desires harmony and even conventionality, yet also chafes at the attendant rigidity and hypocrisy of her times. This explains why, though many of Pym's novels feature unmarried (and "excellent") women, *Excellent Women* places so much emphasis on Mildred's unmarried status. Mildred's ambivalent relationship with herself as spinster is integral to both the plot and its understated satire. This focus is clear from the novel's opening scene, which finds Mildred at home as a new couple moves into the flat below hers:

"Ah, you ladies! Always on the spot when there's something happening!" The voice belonged to Mr. Mallet, one of our church wardens, and its roguish tone made me start guiltily, almost as if I had no right to be discovered outside my own front door.

"New people moving in? The presence of a furniture van would seem to suggest it," he went on pompously. "I expect *you* know about it."

"Well, yes, one usually does," I said, feeling annoyed at his presumption. "It is rather difficult not to know such things." (5)

In this first paragraph, readers learn how an older single woman is viewed by men like Mr. Mallet—as a busybody with nothing else to occupy her time—as well as the novel's distinctive response to such presumptions. Mildred is annoyed, and politely challenges his condescension; despite her civility, she is no doormat. Furthermore, her questioning of her right to exist even on the steps of her own home, which might be read as an internalization of societal views, actually—when placed alongside her clear annoyance—reads as sardonic. So too the lines

reflecting on her less-than-ideal living space: “‘I have to share a bathroom,’ I had so often murmured, almost with shame, as if I personally had been found unworthy of a bathroom of my own” (6). The reader has been primed by narrative’s intermittently caustic tone not to take such statements at face value.

In fact, Mildred’s description of her flat, which seems at first to be another self-deprecating admission of her humble circumstances, actually offers a sly commentary on the spinster’s societal role. The space is “not properly contained and without every convenience” (6), just as a spinster’s life is not only more difficult outside the sanctioned arrangement of marriage, but lacks the clear borders of those in conventional relationships and/or family units. According to conventional wisdom, the single woman outside of her father’s house is “not properly contained,” and thus any involvement in the public sphere is suspect, for it suggests unsanctioned agency. I would argue that this is at the root of the persistent negative stereotype of the meddling, gossipy spinster, a trope Pym playfully engages throughout her novel.<sup>72</sup> Dorothy Yost Deegan’s 1951 study of novelistic depictions of spinsters provides added insight into these stereotypes. In considering unmarried women who are involved in the public sphere, her description captures the prevailing attitudes of the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries: “What comes to light...is that many of these women do take an active interest in the affairs of their neighbors, but it is by no means a constructive interest. They are the purveyors of gossip, ferreting out and spreading scandal” (90). There are exceptions, of course, and Deegan goes on to describe an American version of Pym’s “excellent women,” that “small group...composed of the well-born women of means who devote themselves in an amateur fashion to some charitable enterprise” (91). These women are unobjectionable, but “they

---

<sup>72</sup> See Mildred’s early reflection that if she unmarried and thirty, “there really is no hope for her” (5) not to get involved in other people’s business.

generally go about their duties in the dignified, quiet, and aloof manner befitting their station, and are seldom persons who could otherwise exert what could be called an influence” (91-92). At least in the world of fiction, spinsters who wished to be actively involved in their communities faced the choice of either being deemed “unwholesome...purveyors of gossip” (90), or of being “dignified” (92) but ineffectual.<sup>73</sup> Pym, writing only a few years after Yost’s study, offers something different: Mildred Latham. Like the flat she inhabits, she is “not properly contained” in her involvement with her friends and neighbors, yet also shows herself to be instrumental in ensuing events, such as saving the Napiers’ marriage. Rocky comments late in the novel, “I know how you love contriving things...Births, deaths, marriages and all the rest of it” (222), and as Mildred herself says of the early events of the novel (only slightly sardonically), “I did not then know to the extent I do now that practically anything may be the business of an unattached woman with no troubles of her own, who takes a kindly interest in those of her friends” (47). Pym’s portrayal of Mildred as both dignified and effectual helps demonstrate that accusations of meddling, such as Mr. Mallet makes on the novel’s first page, should actually be read as a patriarchal response to a single woman’s freedom and agency.

Not every instance of Mildred’s self-reflection is so weighted, yet even in cases where Mildred seems most to mark herself as a typical spinster, Pym unsettles a straightforward reading. Consider the dialogue tag Pym gives to Mildred’s response when her neighbor Rocky asks if she’d ever open a bottle of wine just for herself: ““Of course not,’ I replied, rather primly, I’m afraid” (32). This self-commentary suggests that Mildred cannot help playing her part of the

---

<sup>73</sup> Dundy’s Sally Jay Gorce also comments on the few options spinsters had of easy engagement in the public sphere. Seeing “a lot of American spinsters” traveling together, she reflects, “It always made me sad to see that there were so many unmarried women in the world— sadder to realize that they were largely unseen because there were so few public places they dared brace without a sense of strain” (86).

prim spinster, but would prefer not to be, thus destabilizing the prim spinster type even as Mildred plays into it in her immediate interaction.

I am not the first to remark on this technique of dual narration characteristic across Pym's novels. Barbara Bowman notes the productive contrast between Pym's narrator's thoughts and speech: "Within the world of Anglican parishes, jumble sales, ritualistic teas, and lectures at anthropological societies, Mildred in *Excellent Women* subverts the dominant culture's expectations and constructs an alternate system of linguistic codes marked by a keen sense of the ridiculous" (84). Similarly, Laura Doan observes the "continuous sounding of two narrative voices" in Pym's texts, writing, "On the surface, the reader is presented with a narrative voice fully compliant with normal social expectations—a voice politely civil even when answering an impudent, audacious query. Yet underneath this veneer of mild-mannered conformity, another voice speaks to challenge, even to ridicule, a social order that calls for the repression of unkind retorts" (63-64). Bowman's and Doan's points are well made, but each stops short of addressing this dual-voiced subversiveness as it applies to Mildred's own self-conception as spinster, focusing instead on her interactions with other characters. Bowman does address what she calls "Mildred's struggle with, and sometimes failure to struggle with...her self-deprecation, her lack of certainty and her tendency to be inconsistent" (87), by arguing that part of Pym's project is to document Mildred's struggle to attain self-knowledge (88). However, such a reading implies a fairly straightforward growth narrative, while Mildred's wry and contradictory reflections, beginning early in the novel, demonstrate that *Excellent Women* is not a neat trajectory of a woman moving beyond her feeling of spinsterly inferiority.

Rather, Pym offers a spinster narrator who will invoke the prevailing attitude toward spinsters, but with a wink. For instance, when Mildred and fellow "excellent woman" Winifred

must plan for the jumble sale, the other woman agonizes over how much to price a fancy jumper donated by Lady Farmer, a wealthy congregant. The dilemma over price arises because Winifred wishes to buy the dress herself, in case “people should come to supper, you know, the Bishop or anybody like that,” a rationale that is met with polite and ponderous silence (18). After offering more of Winifred’s chatter, Mildred tells us, “We discussed the matter gravely for some time” (18). The tone of this line is gently self-mocking, indicating a narrator fully aware of the absurdity of the weight minor things can take on in a typical spinster life. Yet any impulse to judge Mildred for engaging in such a typically spinsterly preoccupation is undercut by her wry self-awareness. It also sets her apart from the more frivolous and child-like Winifred. After all, Pym does not deny the existence of women with stereotypical spinster traits. In fact, her satire extends to those who seem to have inhabited their expected roles at the expense of their individuality, such as Mildred’s former roommate Dora, who is obsessed with trivial dramas and insists she “wouldn’t know [herself]” in anything but an unflattering brown woolen dress (102). In contrast, Mildred claims her individuality from the beginning; it is, in fact, why she herself is not interested in Lady Farmer’s dress herself despite the fact that “it was a lovely material” (18). For as she says, it was “so completely Lady Farmer that I should have hated to wear it, and swamp any individuality I possess” (18). Self-deprecation, again, in the phrasing, but it has been tempered by her earlier tongue-in-cheek contemplation of Lady Farmer’s “air of comfortably upholstered elegance” (18). Mildred might adopt a pose of uncertainty regarding her own individuality, but she does not want to look like a sofa, however well-upholstered. Pym’s subtle humor negates any straightforward reading of Mildred as typical spinster.

More challenging to reconcile with a feminist agenda (even an understated one) are the many instances in which Mildred reflects negatively on her single status and does not appear to

undercut it. Indeed, one might conclude that the sheer number of times Mildred bemoans her identity as spinster, together with the fact that the novel ends with the suggestion of her marriage, together override Pym's more subversive gestures where spinsterdom is concerned. Yet I argue that it is this very profusion that should alert readers to the text's satiric valence. Within a few pages, Mildred has reflected a half dozen times on her own unmarried position, often with an exaggerated humility that rings as suspect. She describes herself as "mousy and rather plain", drawing attention to these qualities with "shapeless overall and old fawn skirt" (7). She reflects that she is "getting spinsterish and 'set' in [her] ways" (20), and feels "more than usually spinsterish and useless" when listening to a woman's program on the radio (28). She apologizes to the Napiers for her appearance "in what [she] felt was a stupid, fussy way" thinking, "As if anyone would care how I looked or even notice me" (34). She continually expects not to be recognized in public by those who know her, sure she is "indistinguishable" (50). When Everard Bone warns her that she will find his paper dull, she "fore[bears] to remark that women like [her] expected very little— nothing, almost" (37), and describes following the married Helena "feeling like a dog or some inferior class of person" (96).

Lines like these are likely what Deborah Donato is referring to when she complains about the novel's "general heavy-handedness that betrays the emotional/artistic confusion of the author, who is not in control of the material." Donato cannot reconcile such statements with a narrator for whom "sympathy is expected" (62). Yet reading the text with Pym's satiric impulses in mind, these statements demonstrate an author very much in control of her material—in this case, exaggeration for specific effect. In the classic tradition of satire, the extremity of Mildred's self-effacement shows the absurdity of the lowly psychological position a spinster is expected to assume. Such persistent and exaggerated statements, when juxtaposed (even if not directly) with

Mildred's more acidic reflections, illustrate Pym's larger satiric project—to draw attention to the rigidity of a society that would engender such a dismal self-concept in its unmarried female members.

Most often, Mildred's reflections are thought, not spoken, and contrast with her outward presentation as a pious and wholly proper "excellent woman." When in a discussion with her friends, Julian Malory (the local curate) and his sister Winifred about who might take a room in their house, Mildred suggests advertising in the *Church Times*, at which idea "a crowd of suitable applicants seemed to rise up before [her]—canons' widows, clergymen's sons, Anglo-Catholic gentlewomen (non-smokers)...all so worthy they sounded almost unpleasant" (17). As Mildred knows, *good* does not equal *enjoyable*. When the same group discusses the possibility of getting involved with a married man, Winifred says, "Mildred would never do anything so wrong or foolish," and Mildred, who has become infatuated with the married Rocky Napier, "reflect[s] a little sadly that this was true" (44). Despite her propriety and sincere devotion to the church, such reflections show Mildred chafing (if only internally) against an overly straight-laced life, and challenge any impression of her as a spinster who unreservedly conforms to expectation.

Indeed, Mildred knows "it's rather pleasant to be unlike oneself occasionally" (71). This is especially relevant because acting as *is* expected of her directly contradicts with her own desires. After the widow Mrs. Gray becomes engaged to Julian, she suggests that Winifred should move in with Mildred so as to be out of the newlywed couple's way. Mildred is horrified by the idea (as she has reflected earlier, "as fond as I was of Winifred I valued my independence very dearly" (17)). Mrs. Gray persists in urging Mildred, "Oh, do think about it... There's a dear. I know you are one." Pym offers this delightfully blunt response from her narrator: "'No, I'm not,' I said ungraciously, for nobody likes to be called a dear. There's something so very faint

and dull about it” (128). Mildred’s “ungraciousness” is in response to the insincerity she correctly identifies in Mrs. Gray’s endearment, but she also calls attention to the disadvantages of being consistently conciliatory: dullness, certainly, but less obviously, the invisibility that threatens those who always do what is expected, even when it is at cost to themselves. Spinsters are not expected to have their own desires, a fact Pym satirizes in her depiction of Miss Jessop, a friend of Everard’s mother. The other woman never speaks, except for making a “quavering sound which might have been ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ but...[is] not allowed to develop into speech” before Everard interrupts, and Everard is confused by Mildred’s persistent interest in “just some woman who comes to see my mother sometimes” (149). Such a portrait demonstrates the invisibility of such women to men, but also highlights her contrast with Mildred—an unmarried woman who resists the spinster’s amenability and concomitant invisibility.

Further evidence for understanding the exaggerated spinster motif as part of Pym’s critique can be found in the more traditional satiric portraits of Allegra Gray and Julian Mallory, for their treatment of Mildred confirms the novel’s sympathies. Gray, as the usurping widow, serves as the closest thing the novel has to an antagonist. This is evident not only in her treatment of Winifred and Mildred, but in her unwarranted self-importance and condescending attitude, qualities Pym gives paratextual emphasis to by endowing her with a name—Allegra Gray—equal parts ostentatious and dull. In the previous conversation, she not only attempts to manipulate the Mildred into taking on Winifred in order to make her own life more convenient, but offers blithely insulting conversational queries under the guise of friendly conversation: “‘What do women *do* when they don’t marry?’ [Allegra] mused, as if she had no idea what it could be, having been married herself and being about to marry again” (129). Mildred patiently explains that women such as herself no longer must “stay at home with an aged parent and do the

flowers” (129) but in fact hold jobs and prove themselves “indispensable” in the church. To this, Allegra responds, “Oh, dear, you make it sound rather dreary.” The other woman’s response already invites indignation on Mildred’s behalf, even before she goes on to report that “Mrs. Gray looked almost guilty. ‘I suppose you have to get back to our work now?’ she suggested, as if there were some connection, as indeed there may well have been, between me and dreariness” (129). Mildred’s exaggeration of her “dreariness” in this case is funny, rather than self-deprecating.

Part of Allegra Gray’s condescension is because she, like many in the community, incorrectly assumes that Mildred wished to marry Julian herself (her patronizing offer to pay for lunch as “the very least I can do” [129] adds the finishing touch to Pym’s satirical portrait). One of the most persistent assumptions plaguing women, and one which continues well into the twenty-first century, is that their singledom is not a choice, but reflects disappointment in love. Pym was intimately aware of this perception, addressing it in a letter to a friend in 1938. She describes herself in the third person: “you will be asking now who is this Miss Pym, and I will tell you that she is a spinster lady *who was thought to be* disappointed in love” (qtd. in Doan 139, emphasis added).<sup>74</sup> Doan points out that “the more ambiguous expression [of “was thought to be”] points to the chasm between public perception and individual experience” (139). Pym speaks to the injustice of this assumption with her satiric portrait of Julian in the aftermath of his proposal to Allegra. Mildred offers him friendly congratulations, to which Julian responds with exaggerated concern and sympathy:

---

<sup>74</sup> Pym was only twenty-four at the time of writing; like Rebecca West, who called herself a “typical spinster” at age twenty, she identifies herself a spinster well before society would have deemed her so, thus redefining the label on her own terms.

“It’s so splendid of you to understand like this. I know it must have been a shock to you, though I dare say you weren’t entirely unprepared. Still, it must have been a shock, a blow almost, I might say,” he labored on, heavy and humorless, not at all like his usual self. Did love always make men like this? I wondered.

“I was never in love with you, if that’s what you mean,” I said, thinking it was time to be blunt. “I never expected you would marry *me*.”

“Dear Mildred,” he smiled. “You are not the kind of person to expect things as your right even though they may be.” (133)

Not only does Mildred face the persistent social embarrassment of her single status, but the humiliation of being assumed to be in love and then rejected. Pym’s description makes the joke on Julian, however, for the reader’s knowledge of Mildred’s dispassionate response to his betrothal and her description of him in this scene renders him, not her, ridiculous. When Julian finally leaves for Evensong, he asks, “Are you coming or do you feel it would upset you?” (134). Readers are left with the impression of a man with an absurdly inflated sense of his own power and significance, not of a woman spurned.

More than anything, Pym’s satiric humor exposes the degree to which unmarried women are not treated as estimable adults. This counters those, like Pym’s contemporary Cicely Hamilton, who would claim that the spinster’s position had improved markedly since the 1920s and 1930s. In 1940, Hamilton announced that

If a woman is destined to go through life unwed, my country of England has many advantages as a domicile; there are, I imagine, few parts of the world where the once traditional contempt for the spinster is more thoroughly a thing of the past...[B]y the humorists of the Victorian age she was always depicted as a figure of fun—an

unattractive creature who, in spite of all her efforts, had failed to induce a man to marry her. That was the old maid as a past generation saw her—and we do not see her today; we have too many unmarried women successful in business or professional life, distinguished in literature, science, and art to be able to keep up that. (qtd. in Beauman 62)

Yet while Hamilton rightly celebrates the accomplishments of midcentury single women, Pym demonstrates that her portrait of accompanying attitudes is overly optimistic. Granted, the direct animosity toward the spinster had diminished since the 1930s (Little, “Endless” 23), yet the new attitude of benevolence toward unmarried women often masked condescension, as the behavior of Mr. Mallet, Julian, and Allegra make clear. Such an attitude strips women of even the agency implied by the “dangerous” (ibid.) reading of spinsters in earlier decades, when girls’ schools were thought to be “sinister” hotbeds of lesbian influence (Little, “Endless” 22) and, in the words of Winnifred Holtby, writing in 1934, “the legend of the Frustrated Spinster [was] one of the most formidable influences of the modern world” (qtd. in ibid.).

Spinsters might have gained wider acceptance, but that did not translate to equal treatment. In fact, Pym shows that for many unmarried women, the thirty years that had passed since Lolly Willowes’ relatives compared her independence to “a child keeping house” (Warner 150) brought little change in paternalistic attitudes that view adult women as ineffectual and inconsequential societal surfeit. Even Mildred’s close friends the Napiers are guilty of this attitude. The two discuss Mildred in front of her as they pack up to leave the shared building:

“What will you do after we’ve gone?” Helena asked.

“Well, she had a life before we came,” Rocky reminded her. “Very much so— what is known as a *full* life, with clergymen and jumble sales and church services and good works.”

“I thought that was the kind of life led by women who didn’t have a full life in the accepted sense,” said Helena.

“Oh, she’ll marry,” said Rocky confidently. They were talking about me as if I wasn’t there.

“Everard might take her to hear a paper at the learned society,” suggested Helena.

“That would widen her outlook.”

“Yes, it might,” I said humbly from my narrowness. (238)

The exchange exposes the usually unspoken understanding about what being an excellent woman with a “full life” actually means (or does not mean) by those outside of her ranks. Yet while this could provoke a response of bitterness or sadness, Mildred’s sardonic description of speaking “from [her] narrowness” is a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the Napiers’ patronizing attitudes, and prevents her from being a source of pity for the reader.

Dundy, like Pym, relies on a layering to her first-person narratives, so that Sally Jay’s more stereotypical moments are undercut by internal reflections which challenge an uncomplicated reading of those moments. Readers observe Sally Jay’s chaotic life and idiosyncratic, sometimes foolish behavior, yet the comic timing and delivery of her narration assures readers of her ultimate authority over the impression she makes. This is especially relevant in the moments in which Sally Jay verges, in her appearance or actions, on the ridiculous. An early scene finds her at a café with Larry, an acquaintance she has run into from

back home, and on her second glass of Pernod. Readers learn of the distinctive figure that she cuts in this moment from Larry's reaction:

“Why pink?” he asked, studying my new coiffure carefully. “Why not green?”

As a matter of fact I'd had my hair dyed a marvelous shade of red so popular with Parisian tarts that season. It was the first remark he made about the New Me and it was hardly encouraging.

Slowly his eyes left my hair and traveled downwards. This time he really took in my outfit and then that Look that I'm always encountering; that special one composed in equal parts of amusement, astonishment, and horror came over his face.

I am not a moron and I can generally guess what causes this look. The trouble is, it's always something different.

I squirmed uncomfortably, feeling his eyes bearing down on my bare shoulders and breasts.

“What the hell are you doing in the middle of the morning with an *evening* dress on?” he asked me finally. (10)

One could imagine a film adaption of this scene in which the humor came only from Sally Jay's unorthodox appearance and Larry's critical, if wise-cracking, appraisal of it.<sup>75</sup> However, Dundy undercuts Larry's “study” with one of Sally Jay's own—her personal taxonomy of “that Look”—a funny description, but also one demonstrating Sally Jay's challenge to Larry's ostensible authority through her first-person narration. Her deliberately portentous capitalization shows Larry's assessment of her to be generic, one typical male response among many. Larry may think he's criticizing her, but her satiric taxonomy strips his words of any real power.

---

<sup>75</sup> As of this writing, there has never been a film adaptation of *The Dud Avocado*, though the *Los Angeles Times* reports that Sara Risher, who heads Chick Flicks production company, negotiated the rights to it in 2002 (Nelson).

Similarly, though she may describe herself as “squirm[ing] uncomfortably” in the moment, as a narrator Sally Jay is in full command of the situation. This is clear not only in her funny descriptions, but in her comic timing, such as adding a beat between “I am not a moron...” and “The trouble is...”, and not disclosing herself what she wears in order to draw out the moment and create a more humorous reveal.

Despite her objectification in the scene—Larry’s gaze “bearing down on [her] bare shoulders and breasts” (10)—Sally Jay’s narration upends the male/mind, female/body dichotomy, in which a man mentally assesses a woman’s physical form. It is she who assesses Larry, and humorously diminishes him as a predictable type. Rather than a sex object, Sally Jay resembles what Maria DiBattista calls the “fast-talking dames” of 1930s cinema, who, though beautiful, demand a “reevaluat[ion] from the neck up” (*Fast-talking* 5).<sup>76</sup> Such characters, often found in “screwball comedies” such as Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* (1934) and Preston Sturges’ *His Girl Friday* (1940), challenged film as a tool of oppression and the male gaze because “the fast-talking dame doesn’t stand or sit or lie still long enough to satisfy such customers” (ibid. xiii). Dundy, who was a devoted fan of these films, wrote in her autobiography of what she called “the screwball woman.” Dundy describes her “utter relief” in discovering these characters, for they “sanctioned the outrageous urges [she] could not suppress.” The screwball woman was also a more complex and realized fictional creation than Dundy had encountered before. She was “captivating, charming, light-hearted” but also “capable of holding down a job and at the same time having deep feelings... She was well written, too, well conceived” (*Life* 34). Dundy studied these characters in her youth, even memorizing their quick, witty dialogue. Her close attention manifests in her creation of Sally Jay, with the difference

---

<sup>76</sup> This also provides a link back to Chapter One, for DiBattista notes that Anita Loos was the screenwriter “who gave many fast-talking dames their snappy dialogue” (*Fast-talking* 7).

being that Sally Jay's "fast-talking" occurs primarily in her narration rather than in dialogue. Yet this only makes her quips more effective, for they are private jokes shared with her audience, and are given added comic tension in their contrast with her outward behavior. Recognizing Dundy's character as following in this cinematic tradition is especially significant because in the films of the 1950s, "the fast-talking dame was an endangered species," a fact DiBattista attributes to "the silencing or, more accurately, the slowing and dumbing down of the American comic heroine" of the 1930s (*Fast-talking* 325). Yet in literature she was alive and well. In her wit and narrative command, Sally Jay offers an evolution of the It Girl grown up into a fast-talking dame in charge of her own story.

This quality also sets her apart from other characters in this dissertation. Unlike Anita Loos' narrator, in which the joke is only sometimes *by* Lorelei, rather than *on* her, Dundy consistently signals Sally Jay's control and self-awareness of her story's humor, even when she is the one suffering or being laughed at. This is apparent in the often absurd or cartoonish comic imagery she evokes at her own expense, such as when she suggests the possibility of "shambling back into the bushes like a startled rhino" when encountering "someone from home who knew me *when*" (8), or describes a moment of indecision culminating "when I felt the horns of my dilemma actually toss me into the air" (33). Sally Jay may mangle her attempts to gracefully exit a taxi outside of the Ritz, but her funny description of her foibles, which culminates in flinging herself, panting, "at the revolving doors and letting them spin [her] through" in "an absolute ecstasy of panic" (36) signals a narrator as in control of her impression as film stars Rosalind Russell or Carole Lombard, who brought their screwball heroines to life on the screen.

Revealing the subversive potential of self-deprecation in Pym's and Dundy's novels challenges the position of some of the prominent scholars of the phenomenon. Regina Barreca, in *Untamed and Unabashed: Essays on Women and Humor in British Literature* (1994), contends that in using self-deprecation, women are only appeasing the dominant social group, whether their use of it is performative (as in stand-up comedy) or in daily life. She argues, "If we tell these jokes about ourselves, we'll make the straight, white, patriarchal man our pal, because he finds these jokes funny too" (25). Similarly, Danielle Russell, in considering women's comic use of self-deprecation, reads the phenomenon as occurring when "satire is directed towards the self rather than confronting external targets. In a sense it is a form of accommodation—accommodating the perceptions of others." Though Russell allows that "[s]elf-deprecation can function as a means of defusing a potentially aggressive act or confrontational situation" there does not seem to be much room in this definition for understanding self-deprecation as serving a positive function outside the realm of self-defense.

Ellie Tomsett takes a more capacious approach, suggesting that there is merit in exploring "both how self-deprecatory humor provides a potential strategy for liberation from outdated stereotypical or negative attitudes towards women, and how it can simultaneously reinforce restrictive attitudes," but ultimately concluding that it is usually "both of these things simultaneously" (7). Tomsett specifically considers women's stand-up comedy, and in her qualified view of self-deprecation's positive potential, she takes the position that there is value in a comic sharing feelings of inadequacy, especially as it concerns her body. She writes, "For some audience members, a discussion about aspects of the female body that are normally taboo, even if placed within self-deprecatory routines, may be one of the few ways in which they can affirm that they exist and are validated" (10). However, Tomsett follows this by adding that "any self-

deprecatory utterance in live comedy performance will always simultaneously both reinforce and challenge hegemonic views of women and their bodies” (10). In other words, it might make audience members feel better to hear that others share their negative experiences or self-perception, but it does little to challenge the systems that create their feelings of shame or inadequacy.

Despite finding more unqualified positive potential in women’s use of self-deprecation, I would like to follow Tomsett in considering what self-deprecation does for the interaction between speaker and audience, or in this case, narrator and reader. Though Tomsett’s argument is persuasive in considering the acts of some twenty-first century stand-up comics, I believe a different conclusion can be reached about the speaker-audience interaction when considering mid-century prose. The play between narrator and reader is all the more apparent when that novel is told in the first person and addresses the reader directly. In reflecting on whether anyone, including herself, would ever understand her, Sally Jay addresses her reading audience: “Why was it so difficult anyway? Was I some kind of nut or something? Don’t answer that” (44). Mildred similarly addresses her readers, offering an early caveat: “Let me hasten to add that I am not at all like Jane Eyre, who must have given hope to so many plain women who tell their stories in the first person” (7). Such narrators acknowledge the existence of their audiences, yet the one-way dialogue ensures each narrator’s power over the reader. As Karen Stohr explains, self-deprecation is often used to restore power balances in places where it has been disturbed, such as a boss who tells her own embarrassing story after an employee makes a humiliating faux pas. In determining self-deprecation’s function, it is not to the comment or joke itself that we should look, but “the social landscape in which it occurs, especially social power relationships” (173). I have made the case that we should read novels, especially funny novels, as social spaces,

in which “intra- and extra-textual relations [are] social discourses” (McLoughlin 7). As such, the self-deprecation, in addition to amusing, works to create the illusion of a more equal footing between narrator and reader. If, as I am arguing, the last four novels of this dissertation offer both imaginative respite *and* a new model of psychological resistance, then the latter function requires an alliance with the reader to be effective. The narrator’s self-deprecation works toward that end, in that it “carr[ies] a certain kind of expressive force and...make[s] possible terms of social interaction that would otherwise be ruled out” (Stohr 180), namely, an affinity between narrator and reader that creates new possibilities for the latter.

### **Satire is Anthropological: Turning a Critical Eye on the Romantic Fantasy**

For both Pym and Dundy, this appeal to and connection with the reader makes their social critique all the more effective. In addition to challenging conceptions of a young woman possessed of a “vague nymphomania” (33), Dundy extends to her critique to broader issues of gender roles and expectations. Occasionally this takes the form of satirizing a character with particular traits, such as when Sally Jay describes her cousin’s wife, who is so fixated on her husband that she is startled to find herself acknowledged when introductions are made at a dinner party. She reflects, “I think Dody Gorce was *always* greatly surprised at each new discovery of her separate identity. Not one of those wives who have to glance spasmodically at their husbands before speaking, she simply never took her eyes off him at all if she could help it” (68). Such a depiction lampoons women who refuse to think for themselves and docilely accept a role as accessory to their husband.

However, more often, the force of her critique is directed not at a type of person, but at conventions of romance and dynamics between the sexes that were largely taken for granted at

the time. In a taxonomy of satiric novels, *The Dud Avocado* functions less as a comedy of manners than does *Excellent Women*, yet it shares with Pym's novel what Greenberg calls the anthropological function of the satiric comedy of manners: "If manners naturalize ideology, as James Kincaid argues, then the comedy of manners reverses the process, revealing manners as ideological constructs. The genre in this way provides a double vision: an insider's view intimately versed in the rules of the game, and an outsider's anthropological gaze that offers critical distance" (167). Both Pym and Dundy turn this anthropological gaze on the interactions between men and women.<sup>77</sup> However, even more than Mildred, Sally Jay is ruthless in also turning this gaze upon herself. Take, for example, her reflection on her married lover Teddy's apartment:

It was just a very small *pied-à-terre*, and he kept it of course for only one reason. Frightfully suave, and mature, and expensive, and I have to admit to having been breathlessly impressed by it at first. But after awhile I found that if I ever thought about it for long enough it always made me laugh. I wonder what there is about deception, I suppose I mean discretion (do I?), when it gets organized to the hilt like that, that always makes me laugh? (48)

Sally Jay, despite admitting being taken in with the stylish trappings of her affair, also sees the apartment for exactly what it is: a convenient location for sex (she also notes the divan, which has been "stripped for action" [49]). Her laughter reduces Teddy's "suave" efforts to the transparently and tritely formulaic. Phrasing her last question in general terms rather than specific—"I wonder what there is about deception..."—speaks to her awareness of mundanity of situations like this one: what felt like an exotic affair is actually quotidian. In fact, Sally Jay

---

<sup>77</sup> The anthropological motif (of both character and style) in Pym's writing has been well-documented by critics; see "The 'Enviably Detached' of the Anthropologist: Barbara Pym's Anthropological Aesthetic" by Joe B. Fulton.

berates herself for her lack of originality: “To have an affair with a man, and one's very first affair at that, just because he picks you up under rather romantic circumstances on the Champs-Elysees, takes you to the Ritz and things, and above all, because you're impressed with the fact that he has a wife and a mistress already, what could be more predictable?” (19). Yet Sally Jay's sharp observations and self-reflections distinguish her from other more predictable characters, who might paint such an affair as glamorous or tragic.

Despite the cynical eye she turns on Teddy's preparations for their affair, Sally Jay is even more critical of her own need for some of the more constructed aspects of their relationship. When she learns that Teddy's wife has left him because they were unable to have children, she marks her disillusionment at the crumbling of the romantic façade:

I tried to pity him. It was just about the saddest thing on earth really, and certainly I should have shown some compassion. But there is really no point in telling this at all if I don't tell the truth, and the truth was that now that I felt I completely *understood* him, I completely despised him. From my standpoint what he had just told me was just about the worst thing he could have said to me. The main trouble with being an *homme fatale*, the really, *really* crux of the matter [*sic*] was that one was so dependent on every prop.

Take one away and the whole structure collapses like a house of cards. (51)

As Sally Jay's reflection makes clear, the “*homme fatale*” is as much romantic illusion as the *femme fatale* (or her less fatal sister, the *It Girl*). Yet she also humorously acknowledges the appeal of the illusion. What could have been a standard dismissal of disreputable male behavior instead becomes a funny and penetrating acknowledgment of a mutually counterfeit dynamic between the sexes.

This satirical gaze, looking both inward and outward, is new for the *It Girl* narrator. Whereas Loos' Lorelei treats her reader as another paramour to beguile and mislead, Sally Jay trusts her audience with an admission of the psychological power that the game has over women such as herself, while also laughing at her own susceptibility. By turning an anthropological eye on her own dependence on the "props" of romance, she exposes the artifice more completely. As Pym and Dundy are careful to point out, both Mildred and Sally Jay are fully aware of their role in the game of romance (as Mildred makes clear with her frequent comparison of herself to the Wrens that Rocky flirted with in Italy), and even the pleasure they take from it, when the other player is skilled. Yet their humorously cynical observations mean that readers can never take those interactions for granted as natural. There is no easy detangling of popular conceptions of romance from those inequalities between the sexes that are more easily recognized as pernicious. In demystifying some of the allure of romance, Pym and Dundy invite readers to question the fantasy that undergirds structures of sexism.

Understanding Pym and Dundy as satirists also helps develop a definition of the term that better incorporates the work the typically more subtle and sympathy-driven work of female novelists. As Jaclyn Reed observes, "[w]omen writers who have wielded a caustic pen have been treated as anomalies in what has long been viewed by critics as an androcentric genre" (1) Even when these writers are recognized, they are "critiqued against genre standards which have been established based on the art of satire as it is practiced by men, [which] overlooks elements of their writing which are born out of a female perspective and acquired through uniquely female experiences and social conventions" (ibid.). These traditional genre standards emphasize "moral judgement or attack," calling attention "to individual or collective evil, and, implicitly or explicitly, urg[ing] the reader to participate in the censure of that evil" (Greenberg, *Cambridge*

15, 13). Attack is not a primary mode for Pym or Dundy, nor does “evil” describe what they wish to call attention to. Key to Pym’s specific brand of satire is understatement, and while Barbara Rossen calls her “a finely malicious satirist in the tradition of Huxley, Waugh and [Kingsley] Amis” (2), it would take a more delicate reader than this one to call *Excellent Women* malicious in its attack. The overall tone of its judgement is wry, suggesting one would be less foolish if one reconsidered certain held assumptions, but hardly bludgeoning readers with a position. Dundy’s satire is less immediately apparent as such because it is suffused with warmth and levity, at a far remove from the coldness that Wyndham Lewis praised as an essential attribute of satire.<sup>78</sup>

Both Pym and Dundy diverge from these canonical understandings of satire, yet a more capacious understanding not only helps to counter a historic male bias, but illuminates how satire might best accomplish one of its principle aims: to help readers “discern vice or folly in others and [be] roused to indignation, brought into alliance with the satirist against a common target” (Greenberg, *Cambridge* 13). After all, more vitriolic attacks can work against an author in convincing others of a position and bringing them into alliance with his or her own views. As George Test explains,

As in actual social relationships, the venting of such emotions [anger, indignation, frustration, righteousness, hatred, and malice], or the pose of venting these emotions, as in satire, tends to generate more of the emotion being vented, and, what is more obvious, creates an adverse reaction in the audience. The more obvious the emotion, and it need not be displayed directly, the more likelihood of an adverse reaction. The works of

---

<sup>78</sup> “Men without Art,” p. 121.

Aldous Huxley, for example, have consistently generated in reviewers and critics charges of cynicism, hatred, misanthropy, and puritanism. (17-18)

As a young writer, Pym admired Huxley, and her early novels showed his influence.<sup>79</sup> However, her departure from his blunter and more pitiless approach allows for greater depth and subtlety in characterization. It also lets Pym deliver a satirical message without causing what Test calls “an adverse reaction in the audience” (17), especially when that audience, with its appetite for Pym’s characteristically quiet world, can be assumed to be gentler in temperament. In turn, Dundy’s lightness of touch means she can challenge some of the most engrained conceptions of female sexuality, romance, and gender dynamics, while still fulfilling her readers’ desire for what was, in 1958, called an effervescent “Baedeker of neo-Bohemia” (Levin). Furthermore, while less subtle satires risk sacrificing character, interiority, and psychological realism to their argument, Pym’s and Dundy’s narratives function successfully as both novels *and* critiques.

### **“You Make Everything Into a Joke”: Humor as Self-Rescue**

Despite these critiques, both novels indicate a recognition that sweeping change in relations between the sexes was not likely to happen any time soon. As Sally Jay wearily reflects, “it was not easy to be a Woman in these stirring times. I said it then and I say it now: it just isn’t our century” (55). Pym and Dundy offer readers models for how they might use humor as a psychological survival tactic in the meantime. *Excellent Women* shows humor to be a transformative tool for Mildred at the moments when she is feeling at her lowest. When she finds herself doing the dishes of Rocky Napier while he and Julian are upstairs drinking upstairs in her flat, she finds herself “ready to feel resentful, but then was rescued by seeing the funny side of it”

---

<sup>79</sup> See Anne Wyatt-Brown, “Ellipsis, Eccentricity and Evasion in the Diaries of Barbara Pym” (35-37).

(162). Humor is an instrument by which Mildred can reshape events and thus control their impact on her. She does it often enough that late in the novel Everard, distressed at being seen late at night with Helena, complains, “You make everything into a joke,” (144). Mildred shares her tactic: “Well, I think the whole thing sounds slightly ridiculous. If you can see it like that perhaps you wouldn’t worry about it” (144). There is little opportunity, in Mildred’s staid and insulated community, for her to actually transform her circumstances, but she demonstrates that she can at least take control of their effect.

Similarly, though much of Sally Jay’s feminist resistance comes in her unspoken narration, it can also be observed in her literal re-narration of events in dialogue. After a particularly humiliating dinner party, she finds in recounting the events to her younger friend Judy that her perception of the evening can be transformed in her telling: “...now the whole thing really seemed more comic than tragic. I found I was almost enjoying myself.” (82) Similarly, in discovering that Teddy, whom she had thought to be in love with her, actually is only after “what we call in Europe a dowry” (53), she responds not with anger or a sense of betrayal, but with howls of laughter. After falling off the arm of the sofa in her mirth, and she manages to get out what she has been trying to say:

“Oh, Teddy, darling, thank you.” I was practically sobbing.

“For what?” he asked patiently.

“For restoring my cynicism. I was too young to lose it” (54).

Sally Jay’s laughter allows her the emotional distance to observe and lambast gender relations, as well as protect her own psychological well-being within a system of inequality. Furthermore, her comment about being “too young to lose it” reverses both age and gender expectations regarding

cynicism, unsettling the presumption that a young woman will be either naïve or victimized in her engagement with an older man.

*The Dud Avocado* is a funny novel, yet Dundy is careful not to present her narrator's life as a farce. Laughter often saves Sally Jay, but the novel succeeds as a feminist narrative in part because Dundy makes clear that the stakes go beyond humiliation at a dinner party. After the scene in which Sally Jay and Teddy laugh together, the older man takes it as an invitation to order her into bed (54). What follows—Sally Jay bites him when he tries to put his hand under her dress and he hits her in the face—illustrates the very real violence that women can face within relationships.<sup>80</sup> Much later in the novel, Sally Jay learns that Larry is actually a sort of high-class pimp and thief, and witnesses him through a window with a call-girl who works for him. She sees “Larry quietly, *systematically* beating her up. When she was quite unconscious, he picked up her body and carried her off” (220, italics in original). The description is all the more horrific for its matter-of-factness; there is none of the hyperbole or stylistic exuberance found elsewhere in the text. These incidents provide further evidence that Sally Jay's narrative humor is a chosen response to a world in which violence and misogyny are facts of women's lives.

Pym includes no such violent undercurrent, but the stakes of what Mildred faces—loneliness, marginalization, and disappointment—are also real. Yet the humor, shared as it is by a community of sympathetic readers, prevents the book's overall affective register from being melancholic. Nancy Walker proposes that “women's humor embodies a ‘we-they’ dialectic in which men are, in many ways, external to women's experience” (13), a fact reflected both in Mildred's experiences and in Pym's own reflections on the book's reception. Pym writes in a letter from 1963, “Richard [Roberts] has been reading some of my books...EW he found terribly

---

<sup>80</sup> Dundy learned the threat first-hand at an early age; in her autobiography she recounts her alcoholic father's violent rages throughout her childhood, including chasing her with a knife (20).

sad, but witty— why is it that *men* find my books so sad? Women don't particularly. Perhaps they (men) have a slight guilt feeling that this is what they do to us, and yet it really isn't as bad as all that" (*Private*, 223, italics in original). A cursory reading of these lines might seem only to suggest a characteristic British stiff upper lip, yet in typical Pym fashion, she slips in a sly critique. Not only do men lack the sensibility to comprehend her book's affective register, but they have an over-inflated sense of their own importance in women's lives—the same quality she satirizes in Julian Mallory.

### **Index of Possibility: Reading for Our Lives**

While I hope I have brought into relief the feminist underpinnings of these texts, the endings of each novel pose a challenge to my proposal of the novels' more subversive aims. *Excellent Women* ends with the suggestion of a union between Mildred and Everard Bone, and the former's reflection that "it seemed as if [she] might be going to have what Helena called a 'full life' after all" (256). Given Pym's frequent comparisons to Jane Austen and Mildred's semi-antagonistic relationship with Everard (his "air of priggishness" (26) sets her against him early in the novel), it would be easy to read *Excellent Women* as a mid-twentieth-century *Pride and Prejudice*. Certainly if the novel succeeds, to this point, in challenging pitying conceptions of the spinster and satirizing those who perpetuate her unfortunate treatment, then it would seem that an ending resulting in assumed matrimony would undercut Pym's nonconformist agenda.

Yet part of this dissertation's larger project is to trace popular women writers' challenges to the fictional tradition of the romantic fantasy, and in this regard, and despite the novel's ending, Pym proves to be doing exactly that. The novel's final pages do not find Mildred having left behind her traditional spinster identity, either by way of a romantic affair or a radical psychic

transformation (*à la Lolly Willowes*). Instead, it ends with the suggestion that she will become involved in some way with Everard, but his utilitarian approach to relationships means that romance, as most novels would define it, will not enter the equation. Everard likes her precisely for those “spinsterish” qualities she has alternately appreciated in herself and maligned. He calls her a “sensible person, with no axe to grind” (151), and one of his primary desires is for her to do the index on his book proofs.

This might seem bleak, if Mildred herself had not demonstrated a thoroughly skeptical attitude toward romance. Despite her muted attraction to Rocky Napier, she views love as “rather a terrible thing...Not [her] cup of tea” (100), and compares it to “having a large white rabbit thrust into your arms and not knowing what to do with it” (145). Her metaphor transforms romantic love, made out for centuries to be soul-affirming and transformative, into something that may look attractive from the outside, but requires work and attention while offering (with apologies to any rabbit enthusiasts) very little in return. She might smile with amusement at Everard’s seeming desire to choose a wife “as one would a casserole” (188), but her own pragmatic attitude matches his far better than that of the romantic Rocky Napier (though flattered by his attention, she is fully aware that he treats women “like playthings, taken down from their shelves only when he wanted an evening’s diversion” [171]). In ending the novel on Mildred’s anticipation of a “full life,” Pym ironically comments on the fact that married or not,<sup>81</sup> Mildred’s life will be “full” in much the same way as it was before. The ending reads as neither bleak nor celebratory, but wry and matter-of-fact, with Mildred offering the same independence of mind and satiric distance from a stereotypically spinster mentality that she has shown all along.

---

<sup>81</sup> Pym’s novels form a self-contained world in which many characters reappear across books; in *Less than Angels* (1955) we learn that Mildred has, indeed, married Everard.

Mildred may never escape being an “excellent woman,” but neither, perhaps, does she want or expect to. The novel demands that we recognize such lives on the women’s own terms, not ours.

*The Dud Avocado* also ends with the suggestion of marriage, a proposal that is the result of a single passionate night that Sally Jay spends with the suggestively-named photographer Max Ramage. So what keeps this novel from being guilty of succumbing to traditional romantic tropes? After all, this is the young woman who claims, in pleading for her freedom to explore the world, “I just go crazy stuck in these institutions” (26), and marriage, after all, is one of the ultimate institutions. Certainly the ending is a surprising one; Max is introduced only late in the novel and briefly, and their entire relationship takes place in the book’s final chapter. An ungenerous reading might accuse Dundy of adding the character as a *deus ex machina* to save Sally from a life as a librarian (a fate she has “been fleeing [her] whole life” (242) and has finally decided to confront). More often, the ending has not been addressed at all, dismissed, along with the plot, as secondary to the novel’s voice and humor. Terry Teachout, in an overall laudatory review, writes that the plot “is helter-skelter and in the end trails off into vapor” (54), and Rachel Cooke, writing for *The Guardian*, agrees that “No one reads *The Dud Avocado* for its plot, which is by turns helter-skelter and non-existent.” Yet the “helter-skelter” nature of the plot actually offers an important piece of the what makes this book surprisingly subversive. Yes, Sally bounces between lovers and seems often directionless, adrift in life. However, when one understands Sally Jay as working in the picaresque mode, it becomes clear that is part of the point. Amid and beneath the madcap humor, Dundy offers something more radical: the suggestion that the men in Sally Jay’s life are all just tools for what really matters—her freedom.

The stakes of the novel are most apparent in the relationship Sally Jay has with her friend Judy, a seventeen-year-old American staying at the same hotel. Judy, in Paris to chaperone her

younger pianist brother, has had a “strict and very sheltered” upbringing (29) and hangs on every word Sally Jay shares about her bohemian life. Judy’s health is poor due to a mistreated case of tuberculosis when she was young, though through most of the novel Sally Jay is too busy to notice. At first seemingly only a minor character, Judy reappears later in the novel when Sally Jay hears that she is seriously ill. She rushes to her friend’s side, to find her “changed almost beyond recognition” (228) and near death. Yet Judy is still desperate to hear about Sally Jay’s adventures. Sally Jay tries to appease the younger woman while also keeping her calm, but to no avail. Sally Jay wonders desperately what to do, then realizes what is really going on:

What did she want? A bedtime story?...She wanted more than that. Judy was in danger and she knew it...My comings and goings were much more than bedtime stories to her. They were real. All the while she kept repeating “And then what happened?” what she really was saying was “Run for my life!” (229)

At first Sally Jay is not sure why the phrase “Run for my life!” has come into her mind, but then she remembers: it is connected to the source of a recurrent nightmare in which she finds herself stuck behind a desk in a busy terminal. The nightmare originates from her experience as a thirteen-year-old, when she ran away from her home on the East Coast with the intention of making it to Mexico. After running out of food in Chicago, she received unexpected help from a woman at the Traveler’s Aid. Instead of turning her in, the woman gave her a little money, saying, “Why shouldn’t you be a bull-fighter if you want to be? I’m sick to death of standing here day after day sending people back to places they hate” (241). Only after this conversation does Sally Jay notice the braces on the woman’s legs that have left her “hobbled” (241). When Sally Jay asked her, “How shall I pay you back?” the woman answered, “You don’t have to pay me back...Good luck to you. *You’re running for my life*” (241, emphasis added). Though the

woman may be crippled and stuck behind the desk of Sally Jay's nightmares, she finds hope in imagining a life of movement and adventure for another woman. Here, then, is the serious truth behind Dundy's comic exuberance: women's stories matter, and visions of female freedom can be life-saving—if not literally, then psychologically.

The scene also speaks again to the novel's self-deprecating humor as a conscious choice on the part of its narrator. Once Sally Jay realizes how important her stories are to Judy, she reflects, "I had been given some task to perform. I mustn't fail. I pulled myself together: Sally Jay, cartoon-strip animal, about to embark on another series of adventures" (229). This scene, including, as it does, the very real details of Judy's disease, should prevent any reading of *The Dud Avocado* as merely the light-hearted romp of a harebrained heroine. The novel's "helter-skelter" plot is intentional, reflecting a young woman committed to living life on her own terms, even when that means "drifting" from one scrape, lover, or adventure to the next. Sally Jay is a rare female addition to the picaresque tradition, for she is nothing if not female rogue or rascal,<sup>82</sup> and the novel's episodic structure means "that additional stories and adventures can easily—even indefinitely—be added to its plot...As Dickens' Mr. Pickwick says to his friends, "the only question is, Where shall we go next?" (468)" (Greenberg, *Cambridge* 187).

Thus, despite Sally Jay's ebullience over her engagement in the novel's final pages, the ending should be read as as much a rejection of traditional romantic ideals as Pym's spinster narrative or the novels of Chapter One. After all, what Sally Jay's most recent infatuation offers her is a new adventure in the form of a trip to Japan, and the novel ends on Sally's excitement over a destination "so cool...so chic...so suave and so sleek and exotic" (255), which overshadows the man that will take her. As Greenberg observes of the picaresque, when the plot

---

<sup>82</sup> The word comes from the Spanish *pícaro* (Greenberg, *Cambridge* 186).

does conclude, “it promises further adventures... the goal is not integration into society, but flight from it” (187). Until society welcomes the kind of practical, emotional, and sexual freedom Sally Jay desires, readers can be sure she will continue to drift.

Despite how different Mildred is from Sally Jay in both desires and lifestyle, her story also offers those readers with quieter aspirations the reassurance that their lives are valid. After all, it is just as important to show a model of a sustaining life that is quiet and stationary as it is to show a model of ambulatory freedom for those who want it. The 1950s may have seen less overt political feminist action than the decades before or after, yet the novels of Pym and Dundy *are* political. They lay the foundation for more radical thought and action by providing alternative models for women’s self-formation: models which question—and laugh at—some of the era’s most firmly rooted assumptions about men, women, sex, and romance. These novels are also vital in continuing to trace the under-considered history of women’s literary humor, for in their plots, characterization, and narrative strategy, they pave the way for humor’s feminist potential in the years to come.

## CONCLUSION

**Fleabag:** Oh fuck it, I have a horrible feeling that I'm a greedy perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can't even call herself a feminist.

**Dad:** Well... *[beat]* You get all that from your mother.

In the last twenty or so years, Western culture seems collectively to have woken up to the fact that women are funny. Women, of course, have known this all along. They have also, as I hope these chapters have shown, continually challenged the prescriptive tropes available to them, whether those tropes be personal, as in the limited roles for unmarried women, or imaginative, as in the conventionally patriarchal fairy tale or romantic fantasy. Yet despite undeniable cultural progress, it is somewhat dispiriting to find how relevant the concerns of these novels of seventy to one hundred years ago still feel today. A single woman of a certain age may no longer expect to find herself, like Lolly Willowes, exploited by condescending relatives,<sup>83</sup> but many will still battle the widespread presumption that partnership and motherhood are requisite for a fulfilling life. Even in 2020, being single is not unfraught. The twenty-nine-year-old actor and activist Emma Watson recently reflected in British *Vogue* on the “stress” and “anxiety” of nearing 30 without a husband and a baby. Her comment that she had worked through these feelings (and the societal pressures that gave rise to them) and was now happily “self-partnered”<sup>84</sup> ignited both scorn and support—only the most recent example of the heated cultural negotiations surrounding a single woman’s identity. As for the hypocrisy of mainstream romantic fantasies—the target of

---

<sup>83</sup> It is worth noting, however, that a 2015 Pew Research poll found that women were twice as likely to provide personal care for aging parents, and most of these women were between the ages of 45 and 65 (Stepler)

<sup>84</sup> 4 November, 2019.

Loos and West—one need only look as far as Netflix’s wildly popular 2020 reality series *Love is Blind*, the “blind love experiment” which featured fit, heterosexual, able-bodied, and TV-attractive contestants tasked to discover, as the trailer portentously intones, “*Is love really blind?*”

As these examples suggest, the divide between high and low-to-middlebrow culture still informs thinking on issues of single identity and romance. While literary novelists and independent filmmakers frequently consider partnership (or lack thereof) and modern romance from varied and nuanced angles, the books, movies, and television shows designed for maximum mainstream appeal not only continue to promote regressive visions of romance, but target these primarily toward women. As Susan Weisser observes, “a bizarre dualism has arisen in representations of romance between portraits of love in contemporary ‘serious’ literature by men and women that range from skeptical to sardonic and the highly stylized mass-produced culture of romantic images and stories for a female audience.” She argues that despite Western culture mostly overcoming the dualism that pairs men with intellect and women with emotion, the overwhelming association between women and romance has not diminished. As she writes, “men may no longer be automatically equated with ‘mind,’ but women are still ‘heart,’ the creators of mass media romantic fiction, the primary audience for romantic films and novels, and both subjects and consumers of bridal magazines and articles about keeping romance alive in marriage” (4-5). This fact speaks to the importance of continuing to track the ways women challenge the more limiting iterations of romantic fantasies and female identity from within popular modes. When best-selling novels and box-office hits promote more progressive or subversive visions, the cracks already visible in popular and regressive ideologies continue to widen.

One such creation, and a natural successor to the funny single women of this dissertation, is the beloved “singleton” of Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’ Diary* (1996) and its sequels. This best-selling novel, which began as an anonymous newspaper column in Britain’s *The Independent* and was later adapted to a blockbuster film starring Renee Zellweger, offers both mass appeal and a comic critique of the expectations put on women. Fielding makes delightful satire and farce out of the pressures of body orthodoxy and the strain of being romantically uninvolved past thirty. In a constant battle to lose weight, Bridget has “spent so many years being on a diet that the idea that you might actually need calories to survive has been completely wiped out of [her] consciousness” (224-5). In addition to calorie counting (most of which come from wine), her diary chronicles her attempts to stop smoking, drink less, and develop “inner poise and authority and sense of self as woman of substance, complete without boyfriend, as best way to obtain boyfriend” (2). Such entries mock the hypocritical messages of women’s magazines and self-help books, and the novel found grateful reception with fellow “child[ren] of Cosmopolitan culture, [who] have been traumatized by supermodels and too many quizzes” and are left feeling like neither their personalities nor their bodies are “up to it if left to [their] own devices” (52). Yet despite *Bridget Jones’* sharply observant humor and its pleasures of identification (including commiseration in the face of sexism), there are better examples of the literary heirs to the authors in this dissertation. For Fielding ultimately conforms to the traditional romantic fantasy rather than challenging it, with love interest Mark Darcy (the name is a conscious homage to *Pride and Prejudice*) finally sweeping Bridget off her feet in time for Christmas. Unlike the happy endings of Loos, Pym or Dundy, Fielding offers no inherent critique of the normative institutions of romance and marriage.

Instead, I would argue that the cultural and artistic creation that best follows the trajectory of the authors in this dissertation toward a full realization of feminist satire's popular potential is Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag*. The show debuted as a one-woman play at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2013, before becoming a two-season show on Amazon Prime in 2016 and 2019. Like the novels in this dissertation, it was both popular and critically acclaimed,<sup>85</sup> so much so that the script is now available as a book, *Fleabag: The Scriptures* (thus allowing it to fit the criteria of this dissertation, if perhaps on a technicality). The show tells the story of Waller-Bridge's character, Fleabag, a modern Londoner "grappling with family, work, sex, love and loss" (Waller-Bridge). The first season finds Fleabag dealing with the death of her mother and of her best friend and business partner, Boo. Her grief is initially obscured by her mordant and raunchy wit, but becomes fully apparent by the first series' end. By season two, she has vowed to stop distracting herself through casual sex, only to fall in love with the priest that is supposed to officiate her father's remarriage.

Like West and Loos, Waller-Bridge inserts herself playfully and intentionally into *Fleabag's* narrative. Though not autobiographical, she has spoken in interviews about "drawing on really personal things" (qtd. in Midkiff) in the show's creation. Waller-Bridge herself was called Flea by her parents growing up,<sup>86</sup> and some family details mirror Fleabag's own: an artist stepmother and a very successful older sister, the composer Isobel Waller-Bridge. Fleabag's intense friendship with Boo, a relationship at the heart of the first season, was inspired by Waller-Bridge's equally close friendship with Vicky Jones, who directed the stage show and served as script editor on Series One. Waller-Bridge reflects on her creative process in *The*

---

<sup>85</sup> IMDB lists no fewer than 47 awards for the series, including a Golden Globe, six Emmys, a BAFTA, and a Screen Actor's Guild Award.

<sup>86</sup> *The Scriptures*, n.p.

*Scriptures*, writing, “With Vicky’s faith I felt totally unafraid. My writing became very focused. I just wanted to make *her* laugh, make *her* cry, make *her* gasp” (410). In this way *Fleabag* echoes the central female friendships—ones much more significant than any the protagonists have with men—of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*.

However, the personal currents in Waller-Bridge’s work also speak to the delicate balance readers and critics must strike when approaching feminist satire. While looking to the lives and other creative works of Loos and West brings to light feminist strategies that might otherwise have gone overlooked, there is the tendency in the twenty-first century to overread for the personal, especially in the work of female writers. As Waller-Bridge dryly reminds readers in an interview for the *Guardian*, “Women can make things up too! It’s not all our diaries!” (qtd. in Thorpe). Critics should be conscious of this kind of over-reading, and instead look to extra-textual sources that speak substantively to the content of the work, such as interviews in which Waller-Bridge clarifies her feminist agenda, or speaks directly to the inspiration for her work.

A more meaningful inheritance from the early authors of “It Girls and Old Maids” can be found in Waller-Bridge’s engagement with exaggerations of female types. Like West and Loos, Waller-Bridge ostensibly embraces a near-caricatured kind of femininity—in this case, a *Cosmopolitan* version of the sexually-empowered woman—only to undercut it with satiric wit. In one scene *Fleabag* struts down the street, telling the viewer, “I took half an hour trying to look nice...And I ended up looking...[*The camera pans round to her face.*] AMAZING. Just one of those days. Gorgeous. Fresh-faced, new top, little bit sexy” (43). The script tells us that a “bruiser-looking” man is approaching and “fixated on her”; *Fleabag* rolls her eyes, both exasperated and “clearly loving that he is checking her out.” Yet when the man passes, his comment is a coughed “[w]alk of shame” (43). Though *Fleabag* is embarrassed, the joke is not

on her and her apparent hubris. Instead, the scene satirically comments on the absurdity of a consumer culture that would urge women endlessly to embrace their inner sex goddesses while doing nothing to address attendant sex-shaming and misogyny. Just as Lorelei Lee's flutterings and malapropisms comment on the success a woman could find through a façade of ignorance and naiveté, or Jenny Baldry's fabricated fantasies satirize romantic idealism, so Fleabag's demoralizing exchange ridicules the mixed messages of modern womanhood.

Waller-Bridge also follows Dundy and Pym, specifically in her use of self-deprecation and the narrative technique of the aside—in this case, one made not within first-person narration, but through direct communication with the camera. Often these two techniques are used in conjunction. For instance, when Fleabag's therapist asks why her father might have given her a gift certificate for counseling, she responds, "I think because my mother died and he can't talk about it, because my sister and I haven't spoken in a year because she thinks I slept with her husband and because I spent most of my adult life using sex to deflect from the screaming void inside my empty heart" (264). The self-deprecating comment to some degree reflects the truth—she does use sex as a coping mechanism—yet the response in no way signals capitulation or poor self-image, but a sardonic self-awareness that undercuts any potential judgement of her sexual behavior. Furthermore, the flirtatious aside of "I'm good at this" (meaning therapy) to the camera that immediately follows reinforces that impression of self-awareness and shows her to be in firm narrative and emotional command.

In these asides, Waller-Bridge literalizes Pym's and Dundy's layering of narrative perspective by speaking directly to the audience or mugging to the camera, thus communicating an attitude that usually works in contrast to her behavior in the rest of the scene. By doing so, she complicates her moments of what could be self-satire by drawing attention to the ubiquity of

female performance, especially in matters of sex. For example, she relates to the audience how she used to go along with an ex-boyfriend's persistent requests for pictures of her vagina at all hours of day—a montage we are shown in flashback—but makes eye contact with the camera as she does it: she is “exhausted”; “bored” (75). Even in the middle of sex, it is the viewer with whom she creates intimacy, not her partner. Amid feigned cries of pleasures with a bony lover, she looks to the camera: “It’s like having sex with a protractor,” she tells us (98). The conspiratorial mode of her asides creates a sense of female alliance, intimacy, and authenticity that stands in contrast to the performance that she finds requisite with men. Fleabag might be using sex to deflect from her pain, but her relief comes from the honesty and humor found in her alliance with the imagined female viewer, not union with a partner.

Waller-Bridge also uses these asides for more straightforward satirical purpose, as Pym or Dundy do when their narrators encounter particularly hopeless exemplars of the status quo. In one such instance, Fleabag stops into a sex shop with a toothy date who has picked her up on the bus, and we witness the unfortunate man (whom the script refers to only as “Bus Rodent”) “terrified” (87) by his surroundings. He tries to hide this fact by jokingly picking up a penetrable vagina and telling Fleabag, “You should totally get one of those” (88). The exchange that follows ruthlessly satirizes both his cluelessness and his anxiety regarding female sexuality:

Fleabag: A vagina?

Bus Rodent: Yah!

*[She looks again at the penetrable vagina he is suggesting she might need. She decides to try some intelligent banter.]*

Fleabag: Ah, I’ve already got one.

Bus Rodent: *[not getting it]* Really... you—you’ve got one?

Fleabag: I take it with me everywhere

Bus Rodent: No you lie! You do not have one on you now...?

Fleabag: Yup. *[to camera]* Never gonna get it.

Bus Rodent: Where?

Fleabag: Where is my vagina?

Bus Rodent: Yeah!

Fleabag: Where is my vagina?

Bus Rodent: Yeah!

*[Beat.]*

Fleabag: Ah you got me! I don't carry a vagina around with me! *[beat]* That would be way too provocative.

*[They laugh.]* (88-89)

In this scene, the aside to the audience reinforces Fleabag's stinging send-up of the man's discomfort and his ignorance of both female desire and anatomy. The exchange is not for him—she knows he's "never gonna get it"—but for us, invited into the joke played out against his oblivious grin. The final satirical blow comes, paradoxically, when she relents, ironically agreeing that to possess a vagina would be "way too provocative."

As that last line indicates, Waller-Bridge's satire extends beyond the failure of men to understand women's bodies and sexual desires. Rather, she targets our culture's fraught obsession with sex, one largely divorced from the actual act, despite the twenty-first century's professed focus on mutual pleasure and consent. "I'm not obsessed with sex," Fleabag narrates to the camera from the toilet. "I just can't stop thinking about it. The performance of it. The awkwardness of it, the drama of it. The moment you realize someone wants your body...Not so

much the feeling of it” (42). Sex, for Fleabag, is a distraction and a drug, rather than a path toward self-knowledge or expression of intimacy. Waller-Bridge does not follow in the path of the “years-long wave of bad-girl comedy” (Nussbaum) by reveling in Fleabag’s sexual exploits—the viewer knows her behavior is compulsive and ultimately unsatisfying—yet neither does Waller-Bridge adopt a moralizing tone. Rather, Fleabag’s obsession speaks to the difficulty of being a “good feminist” within the modern cultural landscape.

Fleabag knows that her worth shouldn’t be determined by her desirability, yet she, like all women, is surrounded by innumerable messages to the contrary. In the first episode, the script describes Fleabag reading a newspaper with “an advert boasting: ‘Thinking of getting a mortgage?’ with an inexplicably naked woman advertising it. Fleabag does not react. Because none of us do” (10). The series offers a challenge to narrow definitions of feminism, asking viewers to acknowledge the discrepancy between progressive ideological positions and lived realities. Thus when a feminist lecturer asks who would trade five years of their life for the “so called ‘perfect body’” and Fleabag’s and her sister’s hands shoot into the air, it is not the *correct* answer, judging by the rest of the audience (21), but as Lorelei Lee or Delysia LaFosse would be quick to tell you, a perfect body is powerful and practical commodity.

It is also one that, thanks to our culture’s fetishization of youth, comes with an imagined expiration date. A woman Fleabag’s age may no longer be called a spinster, but according to Martin, her alcoholic and lecherous brother-in-law, she should “probably get [herself] out there” because she’s “juuust tipping [her] prime” (85). Waller-Bridge writes Fleabag in such a way as to both acknowledge and undermine the force of such societal messages. When she sits the bath with an especially attractive sexual partner, Fleabag reflects on the predictability of his type and the progression of their interactions:

Fleabag: *[to camera]* So reliable. Utterly inaccessible, relentless profound. All he wants is to get you in the bath and ask questions like—

INT. ARSEHOLE GUY'S BATHROOM—NIGHT

[Cut to: a close-up of Arsehole Guy's perfectly dampened hair and glistening face in the bath.]

ARSEHOLE GUY: What are you afraid of?

[Fleabag sits at the other end.]

FLEABAG: *[to camera]* And you find yourself saying things like—

*[to Arsehole Guy, profoundly]*

I guess...losing the currency of youth.

*[He looks at her, intrigued, impressed. Fleabag looks to camera. Smashed it.]* (52)

Despite performing her “part,” and even ironically speaking the truth (she will later confess to the feeling that “my body, as it is now, really is the only thing I have left and when that gets old and unfuckable I might as well just kill it” [190]), her irony and self-awareness within this scene speaks to her resiliency. Such asides act as a verbal counter-punch, even when that opponent is, in many ways, herself. Emily Nussbaum writes, “The truth is, no matter how many men Fleabag sexts with and seduces, it’s women that she is really obsessed with, starting with herself—she’s both repulsed by and drawn to the way that femininity is a sick competition, a system that she keeps helplessly trying to game.” Nussbaum is mostly correct—it’s the women that matter here, and Fleabag *is* both repulsed by and drawn to the “sick competition” of femininity. But “helpless” is not the word to describe her attempts to “game the system”. Even when she fails with men, her asides to the viewer allow her to both participate in the game (thus exaggerating it for satiric effect) and comment upon it, thereby diminishing its psychic force. In demanding a

reexamination of femininity, and indeed, of feminism, Fleabag shows herself to be far from helpless.

In her commentary on the series, Waller-Bridge traces its origins to a “cynical spiral” she experienced in her mid-20s: “A rage grew inside me at the invisible lectures I felt I was getting all the time about how to be a woman, how to be a feminist” while the world continued to “measure a female’s worth only by her desirability.” She writes, “From there I looked down into the abyss and at the bottom of it was Fleabag looking up at me, in lipstick. Her attitude. Her humour. Her ability to sum a person up and eviscerate them with a single, brutal insight is what drove me to write her. She said the unsayable, but it was the truth, albeit bent with cruelty” (408). Interestingly, Waller-Bridge describes a more classically aggressive mode of satire, yet despite Fleabag’s “cruelty,” the emotional complexity of her character and the honesty of her pain invite narrative sympathy, making her “unsayable...truth[s]” all the more potent. In looking forward to the future of feminist humor, we should expect more complexity of genre and affective register—screwball comedies spiked with anger, notes of frustration and even despair in witty repartee. Like *Fleabag*, we also should expect popular feminist satire to continue to trouble the definitions of feminism itself, to expose what Waller-Bridge calls “the traps [and] mines you can step on” (“Phoebe”) when it comes to progressive ideology. Feminist humor is not always “good feminism.” Instead, it offers a space to confront cultural tensions, as when Fleabag blurts out in a Quaker meeting that “sometimes worr[ies]...that [she] wouldn’t be such a feminist if [she] had bigger tits” (315). We should consider feminist humor not as a blueprint or a manifesto, but as a grab bag of necessities: a release valve, a combustion spark, a mirror.

In addition to the success of what we might call *Fleabag*'s "intimate satire," in which the force of the critique can be found in part through Fleabag's emotional alliance with the viewer, there is another significant way that Waller-Bridge follows some of the authors of this dissertation. For *Fleabag*, like *Lolly Willowes* and *Miss Pettigrew*, is a modern fairy tale, a story that engages archetypal tropes to dynamic new ends. As Joanna Wilson-Scott observes, Fleabag is

a "persecuted heroine" with strained family relationships...[and] thus fits neatly into the fairy tale mold, as she is "intimately tied to domestic conflicts involving a weak or passive father, an absent [...] mother, and a domineering stepmother" (Møllegaard 2017, 175).<sup>87</sup> She is no longer completely welcome in her childhood home, explicitly forbidden by her father from going upstairs (a rule she flagrantly flouts on both of her visits to the house), and is left to fend financially for herself, despite mounting debts and a failing business. (275)

Recognizing the fairy tale structure of the series brings its non-comic aspects into relief. After all, *Fleabag* is more about grief than sex. As Wilson-Scott rightly points out, despite never seeing Fleabag's mother, she is "omnipresent" (276) in the show, referenced through visual symbols, conversations, frequent graveyard scenes, and even Fleabag's friend Boo. Wilson-Scott observes that Boo "had been the only nurturing and warm presence in Fleabag's life, singing with her, touching her face, buying her clothes, teaching her valuable lessons about compassion, and telling her that she loves her...[I]n her ability to mirror the mother, Boo serves to highlight the relevance of the latter's absence" (Wilson-Scott 276). Waller-Bridge follows in the fairy tale tradition of the absent mother, yet unlike classic narratives, she demands a recognition of the

---

<sup>87</sup> "To be fair," Fleabag tells the camera, "She's not an evil stepmother...She's just a cunt" (28).

*continued* importance of the maternal relationship. The viewer never sees Fleabag's mother because Fleabag will not allow herself to fully see her, despite her omnipresence in her daughter's psyche. Yet only by acknowledging her grief and love can Fleabag move forward in her life.

There is even a prince, of sorts, to help her on her journey, yet his role will be a far cry from any traditional rescue narrative, and he himself is not the prize. Season Two finds Fleabag falling in love with a "hot" priest (237), played by Andrew Scott (thus playing into a certain romantic fantasy,<sup>88</sup> albeit a new one to this dissertation). We sense that initially Fleabag's infatuation is a kind of game; she has chosen the most unavailable man, against whom she will test her powers of attraction. Yet what starts as a sexual challenge and a way to provoke her godmother becomes, as she gets to know the priest, a relationship with deep emotional stakes. Though the priest's character is complex and fully-realized, his ultimate function in the series is as a tool to aid in Fleabag's psychological journey toward self-reflection and honesty in confronting her grief. In other words, this fairy tale offers a new role for the archetypal prince: he is neither a reward for the heroine or an antagonist (as in animal bride stories) but a friend—a novel concept even among modern fairy tales.

In a stroke of meta-narrative genius, the priest performs this aid for Fleabag by noticing her asides to the camera—the times when she humorously deflects from the situation at hand. In one such moment, he asks her, "Where did you go?" and Fleabag "looks at the camera in panic." He persists: "There. There. Where did you just go?" (308) Though these asides have provided much of *Fleabag's* satirical force, they are also the protagonist's psychological escape from dealing with difficult emotional truths. The intimate humor Fleabag finds with the viewer is, in

---

<sup>88</sup> The fantasy was apparently a potent one; after the season premiere "searches for the word *religious* on the site Pornhub spiked by 162%" (Collins 145).

truth, a weak substitute for the sustaining female relationships she has lost. By really *seeing* Fleabag and her grief, the priest reminds her that she not, in actuality, “completely fucking alone” (190) as she has felt.

In her commentary on *The Scriptures*, Phoebe Waller-Bridge writes that initially she doubted that there should be a second season for the series, feeling that Fleabag’s story had already been told. Her director, Harry Bradbeer, responded by saying, “If [Fleabag] has something else to learn, then we have more story to tell.” He was “convinced that the greatest love story we had to tell was between Fleabag and herself.” Waller-Bridge writes that she “shuddered at the sentimentality of it, but...knew it was true” (412). Here, then, is the greatest challenge to the traditional romance fantasy, and one shared by many of the authors in this dissertation. Whether it is Miss Pettigrew growing aware of her own powers, Lolly Willowes lolling “content” on a hillside, or Sally Jay Gorce preparing for an adventure in Japan, the most important romance these novels offer is of a woman with herself. Such narratives do not demand a rejection of men, but they radically decentralize them in the heroine’s psychological journey. This is what feminism asks of us: not for an end to romance or fantasy, but only that we stop telling same story. *Fleabag* shows that the fairy tale tradition—inherently malleable and constantly reinventing itself—is still a rich form for speaking to the complexity of female experience.

*Fleabag*’s final episode ends with Fleabag and the priest at a bus stop. She tells him she loves him, a statement significant not because there is any expectation of them being together, but because it shows that Fleabag has opened herself back up to vulnerability and to love. Fleabag knows this; it is why she interrupts him when he starts to respond: “No no don’t,” she says. “Let’s just leave that out there for a second on its own...I love you.” (403) It becomes clear

the bus is never coming, and the priest gets up to leave, but not before telling Fleabag he loves her too. The script offers this description of the moments following: “Fleabag sits there. She opens the bag and pulls out the STATUE.” This statue, made by Fleabag’s godmother, is the show’s recurring symbol of Fleabag’s mother, for, as we find out late in the second season, it was modeled on her mother’s body. Thus Fleabag’s repeated theft of the statue from her godmother is revealed to be not a childish prank, but a necessary effort to reclaim her mother. The script continues, “She looks at it...Her golden mother sitting with her at a bus stop in the middle of the night. Just the two of them” (405). When Fleabag walks away from the bus stop and the camera, it is with a sense of triumph. She is walking into the next chapter of her life, her mother figuratively at her side.

We can look forward to the next chapter in feminist humor with the same sense of optimism, as well as gratitude for the women who came before. Virginia Woolf observed in “A Room of One’s Own” that “a woman writing thinks back through her mothers” (70). Critical study of the literary “mothers” of today’s popular funny feminists is necessary not only in terms of recognizing an understudied tradition, but in understanding the pressures and tensions that still define women’s humor today, the nuances of resistance inherent when one works both in and against the dominant modes. After all, humor cannot be studied in isolation, any more than a joke can survive an empty room. It must be understood in terms of community, of audience, of cultural history. The novels of “It Girls and Old Maids” are part of a living tradition, one whose voices we must continue to seek out, analyze, and appreciate anew.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

“A Disappointed Reader.” *The Freewoman*, 2.36 (1912): 198. *Modernist Journals Project*.

Brown and Tulsa Universities, Ongoing. Web.

Auerbach, Nina, and Knoepfelmacher, U. C. *Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers*. University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Amory, Cleveland, et al. *Vanity Fair: Selections from America's Most Memorable Magazine : A Cavalcade of the 1920s and 1930s*. The Viking Press, Publishers, 1960.

Auerbach, Nina, and Knoepfelmacher, U. C. *Forbidden Journeys : Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers*. University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Babcock-Abrahams, Barbara. “‘A Tolerated Margin of Mess’: The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered.” *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1975, pp. 147–186.

Bacchilega, Cristina. *Postmodern Fairy Tales Gender and Narrative Strategies*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997.

Baker, Lindsay. “The History of the It Girl.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 21 Apr. 2001, [www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2001/apr/21/weekend.lindsaybaker1](http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2001/apr/21/weekend.lindsaybaker1).

Bal, Mieke, and Boheemen, Christine Van. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 3rd ed. Toronto: U of Toronto, 2009. Print.

Barnett, Vincent and Alexis Weedon. *Elinor Glyn as Novelist, Moviemaker, Glamour Icon and Businesswoman*. Taylor and Francis, 2016.

Barreca, Regina. *Untamed and Unabashed: Essays on Women and Humor in British Literature*. Wayne State University Press, 1994.

———. *They Used to Call Me Snow White . . . But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor*, University Press of New England, 2013.

- Baym, Nina. *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and About Women in America, 1820-1870*. Cornell University Press, 1978.
- Beauman, Nicola. *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39*. Virago, 1983.
- Berger, John, et al. *Ways of Seeing*. British Broadcasting Corporation: Penguin Books, 1973.
- Bergson, Henri. *Le rire in Œuvres*, Second Edition. Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1963.
- Berlant, Lauren Gail. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Duke University Press, 2008.
- Berlant, Lauren, and Sianne Ngai. "Comedy Has Issues." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2017, pp. 233–249.
- The Bible*. The New Oxford Annotated Version, 3rd ed., Oxford UP, 2001.
- Bilger, Audrey. *Laughing Feminism, Subversive Comedy in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1998.
- de Blécourt, Willem. "Sabbath Stories: Towards a New History of Witches' Assemblies." *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, edited by Brian P., Levack. Oxford University Press, May 01, 2013.
- Bowman, Barbara. "Pym's Subversive Subtext: Private Irony and Shared Detachment." *Independent Women: The Function of Gender in the Novels of Barbara Pym*. Edited by Janice Rossen. Harvester Press ; St. Martin's Press, 1988.
- Brown, Erica. *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel: Elizabeth Von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2013.
- Carter, Angela, and Sargood, Corinna. *The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book*. 1st American ed., Pantheon Books, 1990.

- Carroll, Rachel. *Rereading Heterosexuality: Feminism, Queer Theory and Contemporary Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012. Web.
- Casey, Jim. "Modernism and Postmodernism." *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. Edited by Edward James, and Farah Mendlesohn. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012. *ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2137999018?accountid=14784>.
- Cella, Laurie J.C. "Narrative 'Confidence Games': Framing the Blonde Spectacle in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1925) and Nights at the Circus (1984)." *Frontiers - A Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2004, pp. 47–62.
- Chevalier, Tracy. Cover copy. *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*, by Winifred Watson. Persephone Books, 2005.
- Chopin, Kate, and Culley, Margo. *The Awakening: an Authoritative Text, Biographical and Historical Contexts, Criticism*. Third ed., W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.
- Christian, Allison. "Contesting the Myth of the 'Wicked Stepmother': Narrative Analysis of an Online Stepfamily Support Group." *Western Journal of Communication*, vol. 69, no. 1, Jan. 2005, pp. 27–47. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1080/10570310500034030.
- Clay, Catherine. "The Woman Journalist, 1920-1945." *The History of British Women's Writing, 1920-1945, Volume 8*, edited by Maroula Joannou. Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.
- Cogan, Frances B. *All-American Girl: the Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America*. University of Georgia Press, 1989.
- Collins, Lauren. "Say Anything." *Vogue*, December 2019, 137-148.
- Cooke, Rachel. "'A Complicated Hoot.'" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 26 Aug. 2011, [www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/26/dud-avocado-elaine-dundy-rereading](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/26/dud-avocado-elaine-dundy-rereading).

- Connery, Brian A., and Combe, Kirk. *Theorizing Satire : Essays in Literary Criticism*. St. Martin's Press, 1995.
- Cox, Lara. "Standing Up against the Rape Joke: Irony and Its Vicissitudes." *Signs*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2015, pp. 963–984.
- Deegan, Dorothy Yost. *The Stereotype of the Single Woman in American Novels: a Social Study with Implications for the Education of Women*. Columbia University, 1951.
- DiBattista, Maria. *Fast-Talking Dames*. Yale University Press, 2001.
- . *Imagining Virginia Woolf: an Experiment in Critical Biography*. Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Doan, Laura L. *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel*. University of Illinois Press, 1991.
- Dolan, Noël Falco. "Loos Lips: How A Girl Like I Talks to Gentlemen." *Women's Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2008, pp. 73–88.
- Donato, Deborah. *Reading Barbara Pym*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005.
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Ark, 1984.
- Dundy, Elaine. *The Dud Avocado*. New York Review Books, 2007.
- . *Life Itself!* Virago Press, 2001.
- Ehland, Christoph., and Wachter, Cornelia. *Middlebrow and Gender, 1890-1945*. Brill Rodopi, 2016.
- Eliot, George. "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists." *Essays of George Eliot*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963.
- Fass, Paula S. *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920's*. Oxford University

- Press, 1977.
- Faxneld, Per. *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture*. Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Felski, Rita. *The Gender of Modernity*. Harvard University Press, 1995.
- . *Uses of Literature*. Blackwell Publishing, 2008.
- Ferguson, Moira. “Feminist Manicheanism: Rebecca West's Unique Fusion.” *Minnesota Review*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1980, pp. 53–60.
- Fielding, Helen. *Bridget Jones's Diary: a Novel*. Penguin Books, 1999.
- Fiske, John. *Understanding Popular Culture*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2010.
- Frost, Laura Catherine. *The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and Its Discontents*. Columbia University Press, 2013.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton University Press, 1957.
- Gallichan, Walter M. *The Great Unmarried*. T. W. Laurie, Ltd., 1916.
- Garrity, Jane. *Step-Daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary*. Manchester UP, 2003.
- Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Gilbert, Joanne R. “Performing Marginality: Comedy, Identity, and Cultural Critique.” *Text and Performance Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1997, pp. 317–330.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Gubar, Susan. *No Man's Land: the Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*. Yale University Press, 1988.
- “goody, n.1.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2020,

[www.oed.com/view/Entry/79992](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/79992).

Greenberg, Jonathan Daniel. *The Cambridge Introduction to Satire*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.

———. *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*. MacGibbon & Kee, 1970.

Guillory, John. “The Ordeal of Middlebrow Culture (Book Review).” *Transition*, no. 67, 1995, pp. 82–92.

Haase, Donald. *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*. Wayne State University Press, 2004.

Hammill, Faye. *Intermodernism*. Edinburgh University Press, 2009.

———. “‘One of the Few Books That Doesn't Stink’: The Intellectuals, the Masses and ‘Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.’” *Critical Survey*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2005, pp. 27–48.

———. *Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History*. 1st ed., Liverpool University Press, 2010.

———. *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture between the Wars*. 1st ed., Austin, University of Texas Press, 2007.

Harker, Jaime. *America the Middlebrow: Women's Novels, Progressivism, and Middlebrow Authorship between the Wars*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2007.

Hertz, Erich. “The Gender of Form and British Modernism: Rebecca West’s Vorticism and Blast.” *Women's Studies* 45.4 (2016): 356-69. Web.

Hewitt, Avis Grey. “Myn Owene Woman, Wel at Ese”: Feminist Facts in the Fiction of Mary McCarthy.” *Dissertation Abstracts International*, vol. 54, no. 3, 1993, p. 932A.

Highet, Gilbert. *The Anatomy of Satire*. Princeton University Press, 1962.

- Hodgkins, Hope Howell. "Stylish Spinsters: Spark, Pym, and the Post-War Comedy Of The Object." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2008, pp. 523–543.
- Howkins, Alun. "From Diggers to Dongas: The Land in English Radicalism, 1649-2000." *History Workshop Journal*, no. 54, 2002, pp. 1–23. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/4289798](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4289798). Accessed 18 Mar. 2020.
- Hults, Linda C. *The Witch as Muse: Art, Gender, and Power in Early Modern Europe*. University of Pennsylvania, 2005.
- Humble, Nicola. *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- . "Sitting Forward or Sitting Back: Highbrow v. Middlebrow Reading." *Modernist Cultures*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2011, pp. 41–59.
- Hunter, Lynette. *Disunified Aesthetics: Situated Textuality, Performativity, Collaboration*. Montreal; Ithaca: McGill-Queen's UP, 2014. Print.
- Huysmans, J.-K. *A Rebours*. Fasquelle, 1968.
- Jacobs, Mary. "Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Politics of the English Pastoral, 1925–1934." *Critical Essays on Sylvia Townsend Warner*, edited by Gill Davies, Edwin Mellen Press, 2006.
- Jaggard, Alison M. "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology." *Inquiry*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1989, pp. 151–176.
- Jarvis, Shawn. "Feminism and fairy tales." *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, edited by Jack Zipes. Oxford University Press, 2015. *Oxford Reference*. 2015.
- Jeffreys, Sheila. *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930*. Pandora Press, 1985.

- Joannou, Maroula. *Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows: Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness, and Social Change, 1918-38*. Berg, 1995.
- Kennard, Jean E. "Barbara Pym and Romantic Love." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter and Deborah A. Schmitt, vol. 34, no. 1, Spring 1993, pp. 44-60.
- Keyser, Catherine. *Playing Smart: New York Women Writers and Modern Magazine Culture*. Rutgers University Press, 2010.
- Kinney, Arthur F. *Dorothy Parker*. Twayne Publishers, 1978.
- Kuhn, Annette. *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History*. edited by Vicki Callahan, Wayne State University Press, 2010.
- Landay, Lori. "The Flapper Film: Comedy, Dance, and Jazz Age Kinaesthetics." *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, edited by Jennifer Bean and Diane Negra, Duke University Press, 2002.
- . *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: the Female Trickster in American Culture*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.
- Lanser, Susan Sniader. *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*. Cornell University Press, 1992.
- Levin, Martin. "The Company She Kept in Paris." *The New York Times*, 27 July 1958.
- Green, Barbara. "The New Woman's Appetite for 'Riotous Living': Rebecca West, Modernist Feminism, and the Everyday." *Women's Experience of Modernity, 1875-1945*, edited by Leslie W Lewis and Ann L. Ardis. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.
- Light, Alison. *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism between the Wars*. University of Sussex., 1991.
- Little, Judy. *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism*. University of

- Nebraska Press, 1983.
- . “Endless Different Ways”: Muriel Spark's Re-visions of the Spinster.” *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel*, edited by Laura L. Doan. University of Illinois Press, 1991.
- Loos, Anita. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes: the Illuminating Diary of a Professional Lady*. Liveright Pub. Corp., 1998.
- Loos, Anita, et al. *Anita Loos Rediscovered: Film Treatments and Fiction*. University of California Press, 2003.
- Macdonald, Kate. “Witchcraft and Non-Conformity in Sylvia Townsend Warner's ‘Lolly Willowes’ (1926) and John Buchan's ‘Witch Wood’ (1927).” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2012, pp. 215–238.
- MacDonald, Louise. “Clemence Dane’s Fantastical Fiction and Feminist Consciousness.” *Middlebrow and Gender, 1890-1945*, edited by Christoph Ehland and Cornelia Wachter. Brill Rodopi, 2016.
- Mackay, Marina. “The Lunacy of Men, the Idiocy of Women: Woolf, West, and War.” *NWSA Journal*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2003, pp. 124–144. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/4317013](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4317013).
- Mansfield, Katherine, and O'Sullivan, Vincent. *Katherine Mansfield's Selected Stories*. W.W. Norton, 2006.
- Marcus, Jane. “A Wilderness of One’s Own: Feminist Fantasy Noels of the Twenties: Rebecca West and Sylvia Townsend Warner.” *Women Writers and the City: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism*, edited by Susan Merrill Squier. University of Tennessee Press, 1984.
- . Editor’s Introduction. *The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West, 1911-17* by Rebecca West, edited by Jane Marcus. New York: Viking, 1982. Print.

- Maxwell-Stuart, P. G. *The British Witch: The Biography*. Amberley, 2014.
- McLoughlin, Kate. *The Modernist Party*. Edinburgh University Press, 2013.
- Melman, Billie. *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs*. St. Martin's Press, 1988.
- Meltzer, Françoise. *Salome and the Dance of Writing: Portraits of Mimesis in Literature*. University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Midkiff, Sarah. "Phoebe Waller-Bridge Would Like To Point Out 'Women Can Make Things Up Too.'" *Refinery 29*, 30 June 2019, [www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/06/236667/phoebe-waller-bridge-fleabag-family-spotlight-regrets](http://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/06/236667/phoebe-waller-bridge-fleabag-family-spotlight-regrets).
- Miller, Karl. "Barbara Pym's Hymn." *London Review of Books*, vol. 2 No. 4. 6 March 1980.
- Muscio, Guiliana. *Doing Women's Film History Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future*, edited by Julia Knight and Christine Gledhill. University of Illinois Press, 2015.
- Murray, Margaret Alice. *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*. Clarendon Press, 1962.
- Nelson, Steffie. "The Days of Avocados." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 30 Sept. 2007, [www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-sep-30-ca-dundy30-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-sep-30-ca-dundy30-story.html)
- Nicholson, Linda. "Feminism in 'Waves': Useful Metaphor or Not?" *New Politics*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2010, pp. 34–39.
- Nussbaum, Emily. "'Fleabag,' An Original Bad-Girl Comedy." *The New Yorker*, 19 September 2016.
- One. "The Spinster." *The Freewoman* 1.1 (1911): 10-11. *Modernist Journals Project*. Brown and Tulsa Universities, Ongoing. Web.
- Ouditt, Sharon. *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War*. Routledge, 1994.

- Orgeron, Martha. "Making 'It' in Hollywood: Clara Bow, Fandom, and Consumer Culture." *Cinema Journal*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2003, pp. 76–97.
- Pettit, Rhonda S. *A Gendered Collision : Sentimentalism and Modernism in Dorothy Parker's Poetry and Fiction*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; Associated University Presses, 2000.
- Perrault, Charles, and Betts, C. J. *The Complete Fairy Tales*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- "Phoebe Waller-Bridge talks all things Fleabag and Killing Eve." *Women's Hour*. BBC Radio 4. 22 Feb. 2020.
- "Poetry." *The Bookman; a Review of Books and Life (1895-1933)*, vol. 73, no. 3, 05, 1931, pp. 306. *ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/124729927?accountid=14784>.
- Pugh, Martin. "Domesticity and the Decline of Feminism, 1930-1950," in *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Harold L. Smith (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1990), 162.
- Pulsifer, Rebecah. "Reading Kitty's Trauma in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2013, pp. 37–55.
- Pym, Barbara, et al. *A Very Private Eye: The Diaries, Letters and Notebooks of Barbara Pym*. Macmillan, 1984.
- . *Excellent Women*. Dutton, 1978.
- Ragan, Kathleen. *Fearless Girls, Wise Women, and Beloved Sisters : Heroines in Folktales from around the World*. 1st ed., W.W. Norton, 1998.
- Raphael, Linda. "A Re-Vision of Miss Havisham: Her Expectations and Our Responses." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1989, pp. 400–412.
- Rashkow, Ilona N. *Taboo or Not Taboo: Sexuality and Family in the Hebrew Bible*. Fortress Press, 2000.

- Reed, Jaclyn A. *The Caustic Pen is Mightiest: A Tradition of Female Satire in the Novels of Jane Austen, Ivy Compton-Burnett, and Muriel Spark*, University of Denver, Ann Arbor, 2013. ProQuest, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1425296785?accountid=14784>.
- Riviere, Joan. "Womanliness as Masquerade." *Formations of Fantasy*, edited by Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan. London: Methuen, 1986.
- Roiphe, Katie. *Uncommon Arrangements: Seven Portraits of Married Life in London Literary Circles, 1910-1939*. Dial Press, 2007.
- Rollyson, Carl E. *Rebecca West: A Life*. New York: Scribner, 1996. Print.
- Rosenthal, Naomi Braun. *Spinster Tales and Womanly Possibilities*. Albany: State U of New York, 2002. Print.
- Rossen, Janice. *Independent Women: the Function of Gender in the Novels of Barbara Pym*. Harvester Press; St. Martin's Press, 1988.
- Rowe, Karen. "To Spin a Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale." *The Classic Fairy Tales: Texts, Criticism*, edited by Maria Tatar. Second ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2017.
- Russell, Danielle. "Self-deprecatory Humour and the Female Comic: Self-destruction or Comedic Construction?" *Thirdspace: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Culture*, vol. 2, no. 1, November 2002.
- Scott, Bonnie Kime. *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections*. University of Illinois Press, 2007.
- Schweizer, Bernard. "Modernism and the Referendum on Nostalgia in Rebecca West's

- The Return of the Soldier.*” *Modernism and Nostalgia: Bodies, Locations, Aesthetics*, edited by Tammy Clewell. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Print.
- . *Rebecca West Today: Contemporary Critical Approaches*. Newark: U of Delaware, 2006. Print.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl. (Questions of Evidence).” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1991, pp. 818–837.
- Seifert, Lewis. “Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de La Force.” *The Teller's Tale: Lives of the Classic Fairy Tale Writers*, edited by Sophie Raynard. State University of New York Press, 2012.
- Sellers, Susan. *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. Palgrave, 2001.
- Showalter, Elaine. *A Jury of Her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.
- . “Killing the Angel in the House: The Autonomy of Women Writers.” *The Antioch Review*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1972, pp. 339–353. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/4637559](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4637559). Accessed 24 Apr. 2020.
- Simmel, Georg. “The Metropolis and Mental Life.” *Mana*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2005, p. 591.
- Smedman, M. Sarah. “Like Me, Not Like Me: Gulliver’s Travels as Children’s Book.” *The Genres of Gulliver's Travels*, edited by Frederik N. Smith. University of Delaware Press; Associated University Presses, 1990.
- Sochen, June. *Women's Comic Visions*. Wayne State University Press, 1991.
- Somerville, Kristine, and Speer Morgan. “Anita Loos: The Soubrette of Satire.” *The Missouri Review*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2014, pp. 87–109.

- Stepler, Renee. "5 Facts about Family Caregivers." *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 18 Nov. 2015, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/18/5-facts-about-family-caregivers/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/18/5-facts-about-family-caregivers/).
- Sternlieb, Lisa Ruth. *The Female Narrator in the British Novel: Hidden Agendas*. Palgrave, 2002.
- Stetz, Margaret D. *British Women's Comic Fiction, 1890-1990: Not Drowning, but Laughing*. Ashgate, 2001.
- . "Rebecca West, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of Oscar Wilde." *Rebecca West Today : Contemporary Critical Approaches*. Newark: U of Delaware, 2006. Print.
- Stohr, Karen. *Minding the Gap : Moral Ideals and Moral Improvement*. Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Stott, Andrew. *Comedy*. Vol. 20, Taylor and Francis, 2004.
- Tatar, Maria. *The Classic Fairy Tales: Texts, Criticism*. Second ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2017.
- Teachout, Terry. "Laugh and You Laugh Alone." *National Review*, 23 Dec. 1996, p. 54.
- Test, George A. *Satire : Spirit and Art*. University of South Florida Press, 1991.
- Thorpe, Vanessa. "I'm Sorry Fleabag Put My Family in Spotlight, Says Phoebe Waller-Bridge." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 30 June 2019, [www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/jun/30/phoebe-waller-bridge-fleabag-sorry-family-put-in-spotlight](http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/jun/30/phoebe-waller-bridge-fleabag-sorry-family-put-in-spotlight).
- Tomsett, Ellie. "Positives and Negatives: Reclaiming the Female Body and Self-Deprecation in Stand-up Comedy." *Comedy Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2018, pp. 6–18.
- Tracy, Daniel. "From Vernacular Humor to Middlebrow Modernism: Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

- and the Creation of Literary Value.” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2010, pp. 115–143.
- Twycross-Martin, Henrietta. Introduction. *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*, by Winnifred Watson. Persephone Books, 2005.
- . “Obituary: Winifred Watson.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 14 Aug. 2002, [www.theguardian.com/news/2002/aug/14/guardianobituaries.booksobituaries](http://www.theguardian.com/news/2002/aug/14/guardianobituaries.booksobituaries).
- Veatch, Thomas C. “A Theory of Humor.” *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1998, pp. 161–216.
- Vicinus, Martha. *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920*. University of Chicago Press, 1985.
- Walker, Nancy. *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
- Warhol, Robyn R. *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel*. Rutgers University Press, 1989.
- Warner, Marina. *From the Beast to the Blonde: on Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. Chatto & Windus, 1994.
- . “That Which Is Spoken.” *London Review of Books*, London Review of Books, 8 Nov. 1990, [www.lrb.co.uk/v12/n21/marina-warner/that-which-is-spoken](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v12/n21/marina-warner/that-which-is-spoken).
- . “The Old Wives’ Tale.” *The Classic Fairy Tales: Texts, Criticism*, edited by Maria Tatar. Second ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2017.
- Warner, Sylvia Townsend. *Lolly Willowses, or, The Loving Huntsman*. New York Review Books, 1999.
- Watson, Winifred. *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*. Persephone Books, 2005.

- Weisser, Susan Ostrov. *The Glass Slipper: Women and Love Stories*. Rutgers University Press, 2013.
- West, Rebecca. *The Return of the Soldier*. New York: Penguin Books, 1998. Print.
- West, Rebecca, and Marcus, Jane. *The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West, 1911-17*. New York: Viking, 1982. Print.
- Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. Oxford University Press, 1973.
- . “Structures of Feeling,” *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977) 128-35.
- Wilson, Elizabeth. *Only Halfway to Paradise: Women in Postwar Britain, 1945-1968*. Tavistock Publications, 1980.
- Wilson-Scott, Joanna. “Both Absent and Omnipresent: the Dead Mother in *Fleabag*.” *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2020, pp. 273–283.
- “Winifred Watson.” *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 9 Sept. 2002, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1406657/Winifred-Watson.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1406657/Winifred-Watson.html).
- Woolf, Virginia, et al. *A Room of One's Own*. John Wiley/Blackwell, 2015.
- . “Middlebrow.” *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974.
- Yellin, Emily. *Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front during World War II*. Free Press, 2004.
- Zipes, Jack. “Breaking the Disney Spell.” *The Classic Fairy Tales: Texts, Criticism*, edited by Maria Tatar. Second ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2017.
- . *Don't Bet on the Prince : Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*. Routledge, 1986.

———. *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: the Cultural and Social History of a Genre*. Princeton University Press, 2012.