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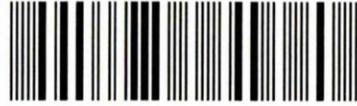
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**Comedy and the middlebrow novel: Elizabeth Taylor and
Elizabeth von Arnim**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Sheffield Hallam
University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2010

Abstract

Comedy and the middlebrow novel: Elizabeth von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor

Erica Brown

This thesis examines the critical reception of the novels of Elizabeth von Arnim (1866-1941) and Elizabeth Taylor (1912-1975) as part of a 'feminine middlebrow'. They are frequently read as offering merely light entertainment and an implicit endorsement of a conservative status quo, and I argue that this is because their depiction of the pain of life and their challenges to the status quo are concealed by their use of comedy and irony.

My analysis of the use of comedy offers a new understanding of these novels. Utilising Freud's theory of 'joke-work' I demonstrate that the sharing of jokes requires shared attitudes and repressions as well as shared knowledge; what Freud terms 'psychical accord'. These comedic texts, therefore, speak to a very specific community of readers, in ways that appear to elude those critics who would dismiss the novels as limited or trivial. The imagined reader of these novels is an educated, middle-class woman, and through my close reading of selected novels by von Arnim and Taylor I detail the layers of intertextuality, comedy and irony that she is expected to be able to understand and reconstruct.

These novels are innovative in form. They self-consciously play with the romance and romantic comedy genres, and with specific 19th century narratives, especially those of Jane Austen and the Brontës. They utilise comedy to address profoundly serious subjects, and in the case of von Arnim's *Vera* (1921), innovatively synthesize comedy and horror. They build complex webs of irony that can be resistant to interpretation, particularly in Taylor's *Palladian* (1946), which meditates on the meaning and value of fiction. My analysis of this innovation challenges the perception of these middlebrow novels as straightforwardly realist, and shows them to be not merely light entertainment, but painfully acute commentaries on the cruel realities of domestic life, especially for women.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank:

My Director of Studies Professor Chris Hopkins for his encouragement, support, advice and unfailing interest; my additional supervisors Professor Sara Mills and Dr John Baxendale for helping me to articulate exactly what approach I was attempting to take; and Dr Matthew Steggle for reading the final draft.

The Document Supply Services team at the Adsetts Centre for arranging copies of so many old newspaper reviews and out-of-print books, without which this thesis could not have been completed.

The members of the Middlebrow Network, an invaluable community of scholars who share my sense that the middlebrow *matters*. I would especially like to thank Dr Faye Hammill and Dr Mary Grover: they have been unfailingly generous with their time and always encouraging of this project. Discussions with them have helped me to clarify my thinking at every stage, and their friendship has helped to keep me going.

My friends and family who have supported me through the five years it has taken to complete this thesis. Particular thanks go to those who kindly proofread chapters: Helen Brown, Alan Brown and Margaret Booth; and to Maurice McCabe, for everything.

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Introduction

'Like all of her books, "Mr Skeffington" is delightful entertainment.'¹

'A new novel by Elizabeth Taylor is always a delight.'²

The few critical articles about Elizabeth von Arnim (1866-1941) and Elizabeth Taylor (1912-1975), both during their careers and in recent years, wonder at their 'inexplicable lack of renown'.³ As early as 1957, Kingsley Amis used the opportunity of a review of *Angel* (1957) to ask why, despite good reviews and considerable readership, 'in surveys of the modern novel, whether printed or oral, [Taylor] never seems to find a place'. Amis finds an explanation in that her work 'bears a superficial resemblance to the "library novel" or "women's novel" frequently vilified (though rarely read) in literary circles'. The resemblance is in the domestic subject, 'true to life as it is lived by large numbers of people', which he argued, 'is as valid as any other, and more valid than many, for exploration by the serious novelist'.⁴ Von Arnim's novels are similarly focussed on a female, domestic world, and as Jennifer Shepherd notes, on one level the omission of von Arnim from literary history is not all that surprising; 'to some degree her exclusion reflects the "same old story" of gender politics at the heart of literary historiography'.⁵ This feminine domestic focus, and the use of a predominantly realist form, has led von Arnim and Taylor to be characterised as 'middlebrow'. In this thesis I will examine the context of literary hierarchies in which Taylor and von Arnim wrote and published, and analyse both why they were regarded as middlebrow, and the consequences and implications of this label.

Gender politics and realist form are compounded by a characteristic that is arguably even more fatal to a literary reputation: these novels are 'delightful entertainment'. In the critical lexicon of the early- to mid-twentieth century, 'delightful' became one of the defining signifiers of the middlebrow. According to the *OED*, to be delightful is to be 'a cause or source of great pleasure'; the origins of the word are from the Latin *delectare*, meaning 'to charm'. Delight, pleasure and charm: all connoted a certain kind of novel in

¹ Amy Loveman, 'Mrs S. On Mr S.'s Stage', *The Saturday Review*, 6 April 1940, p. 22.

² Patricia Hodgart, 'New Novels', *Guardian*, 4 June 1957, p. 4.

³ Neel Mukherjee, 'A Fiendish Mood: The mid-century novels of "the other Elizabeth Taylor"', *Boston Review*, 33.1, (Jan/Feb 2008), p. 37.

⁴ Kingsley Amis, 'At Mrs Taylor's' *The Spectator*, 14 June 1957, p. 84.

⁵ Jennifer Shepherd, 'Marketing Middlebrow Feminism: Elizabeth von Arnim, the New Woman and the Fin-de-Siecle Book Market', *Philological Quarterly*, 84.1 (2005), pp. 105-131 (Accessed online, no page numbers.)

this period; one that was enjoyable, fundamentally unchallenging in style and reassuring in content. Delight has therefore connoted a 'light read'. As Robin Grove perceptively observes of Taylor, 'she appears to have achieved virtual invisibility, by giving her novels the look of simple entertainment, which enables them to pass through the critical arena without comment'.⁶ My aim in this thesis is not to argue that Taylor and von Arnim's novels are *not* delightful entertainment, for they are; but to examine exactly how this enables them to 'pass through the critical arena without comment'. For as well as being entertaining, these novels are also remarkably dark, complex and challenging. They demonstrate that the comfortable, middle-class home is the scene of loneliness, frustration, power-struggles and cruelty, but their message is not straight-forward, and neither is their use of form straight-forwardly realist.

My objective in this thesis is to understand how Taylor and von Arnim's novels can be read as 'simple entertainment', when their content is *not* light, and their insights are so painfully acute. This is in part possible because of the 'same old story' of gender politics and their reception as part of a 'feminine middlebrow' at a time when the feminine, domestic and realist novel is devalued. I suggest, however, that the answer is also to be found in the relationship between these texts and their readers. The pioneering work of Nicola Humble has pointed out that 'feminine middlebrow' novels enjoy an unusually close relationship with their readers: not only are these novels predominantly read by specifically middle-class women, but the texts themselves define their reader as feminine, requiring her to recognise a shared knowledge and identity.⁷ However, the specificity of this imagined reader does not account for the wildly disparate readings – how can, for example, von Arnim's *Christopher and Columbus* (about two sisters displaced by war to America and the xenophobia they face there) be read by her own biographer as a novel that 'hardly mentioned the war at all and concentrated relentlessly on the frivolities to be encountered on the West Coast of America',⁸ while the *Times Literary Supplement* considered that 'the American people who made difficulties for the Twinklers are drawn – though the touch is delicate – in acid'.⁹

⁶ Robin Grove, 'From the Island: Elizabeth Taylor's Novels', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 11.2 (1978), p. 79.

⁷ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 178.

⁸ Karen Osborne, 'Elizabeth', *The Author of Elizabeth and her German Garden* (London: The Bodley Head, 1986), p. 210.

⁹ Harold Child, 'Christopher and Columbus', *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 March 1919.

This thesis argues that these disparate readings are possible because of the use of comedic techniques. Comedy makes these texts delightfully entertaining, enabling them to be read as frivolous, but also offers a mechanism to communicate to the attentive reader a more subversive commentary. As Louis Bromfield observed of von Arnim, 'By these means the writing of "Elizabeth" have come into many quarters to be looked upon widely as light stuff for ladies to read in hammocks under lilac bushes. Obviously this is nonsense'.¹⁰ Chapter 1 examines the literary and cultural contexts in which these novelists were writing, and proposes a theoretical framework in which we can understand their use of comedic techniques. Drawing on feminist scholarship and Sigmund Freud's theory of joke work, I argue that jokes requires very specific knowledge and shared attitudes – what Freud terms 'psychical accord' – in order to be shared. Thus a very specific, highly attuned reader is required to perceive the jokes, irony, and serious subject matter of these techniques, and perform the interpretive work necessary to find these novels funny, ironic and simultaneously serious.

The terms in which von Arnim and Taylor are described by reviewers are remarkably similar, and although this is in part a consequence of the homogenising power of the term 'middlebrow' and the associations of 'light reading', they do have much in common. I have chosen to consider them in tandem because both represent the same paradox: it is their mastery of comedic techniques that allows them to speak to the attentive reader of the cruelties and disappointments of a domestic life at the same time as being entertaining and funny, yet this very mastery has contributed to their dismissal from the literary canon, as it has allowed them to be read as merely light entertainment. Examining these two authors also allows me to bridge the interwar and postwar divide that exists in current scholarship. Taking the study from 1919 with the publication of von Arnim's *Christopher and Columbus*, through to 1961 with the publication of Taylor's *In a Summer Season* tells us much about the changing connotations of the concept of the middlebrow, and its persistence.

Chapter 2 begins my close readings of selected novels with those written in wartime: von Arnim's *Christopher and Columbus* (1919) and *Mr Skeffington* (1940), and Taylor's *At Mrs Lippincote's* (1945). Studies of women's wartime writing form a significant proportion of the criticism that addresses the 'feminine middlebrow', yet the great majority of this scholarship is concerned with reading these novels as sources of

¹⁰ Louis Bromfield, 'Barriers Burned Away', *The Saturday Review*, 11 April 1925.

social history, examining content and themes while neglecting form and style. This chapter's analysis of comedic technique thus fills a gap in current criticism, and simultaneously argues against Paul Fussell's influential analysis of World War I as requiring a new mode of literary representation. I argue that what is striking about Taylor and von Arnim's novels is that in 'responding' to war, their use of form is not significantly different from that utilised in their other novels. There is a continuity of form, both from the 19th century women novelists they claim as their antecedents, and within their careers. The comedic and ironic form shows itself to be as well suited to depicting the impact of war as it is to the peacetime difficulties and desolations of women's lives.

Chapter 3 examines von Arnim's most acclaimed work, *Vera* (1921), and Taylor's second novel, *Palladian* (1946). The plots of both novels immediately recall Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), but these are not straight-forward rehearsals of the Victorian narrative. Von Arnim utilises the traditional romance plot to ask, what happens after the marriage? Her heroine does not 'live happily every after', but enters a nightmare in which she gradually discovers that her husband drove his previous wife to suicide, and that she is in great danger of following in her footsteps. This is also a startling experiment in form, as von Arnim synthesises her usual comedy with a new element: horror. Taylor's novel is also stylistically innovative. She creates a complex web of intertextuality and irony to question the consequences of reading this classic fiction; like *Vera*, *Palladian* is an increasingly self-reflexive novel, which questions the uses and value of fiction, and suggests that her novel-reading heroine will not 'live happily ever after' either.

All von Arnim and Taylor novels have a certain polished style, and in Chapter 4 I examine specifically this 'sophistication'. It is particularly evident in two novels with a similar theme: von Arnim's *Love* (1925) and Taylor's *In a Summer Season* (1961). In these novels middle-aged women marry younger men, bringing into question assumptions about acceptable behaviour for older women, and foregrounding the process of aging. This is a typically painful subject matter, which Taylor and von Arnim address with particularly knowing wit: I suggest these are sophisticated comedies of age in the sense of both content and narrative technique. The reception of these novels is especially interesting as reviewers either regard their sophisticated style as removing the pain of their subject, or appear to be blinded to the pain entirely. Throughout this thesis

I examine the reception of the novels through contemporary reviews. Critics often appeared unsure how to read them, or, as in the example of *Christopher and Columbus* above, the reviews varied wildly. These reviews tell us a great deal about changing literary hierarchies from 1919 until the 1960s, and I will suggest in my conclusion that the devaluation of 'feminine middlebrow' in fact intensified in the 1950s and 1960s.

Chapter 1

The 'Middlebrow' and Comedy: Elizabeth Taylor and Elizabeth von Arnim's Cultural and Literary Context

The emergence of the 'middlebrow'

'But what, you may ask, is a middlebrow? And that, to tell the truth, is no easy question to answer.'¹

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* 'middlebrow', both *n.* and *a.* is *colloq.*

Freq. *derogatory.*

adj. Of a person: only moderately intellectual; of average or limited cultural interests (sometimes with the implication of pretensions to more than this). Of an artistic work, etc.: of limited intellectual or cultural value; demanding or involving only a moderate degree of intellectual application, typically as a result of not deviating from convention.²

A very early use of the term in print was in *Punch*, 23 December 1925, in their regular column 'Charivaria': 'The B.B.C. claim to have discovered a new type, the "middlebrow". It consists of people who are hoping that some day they will get used to the stuff they ought to like'.³ In this early usage the middlebrow is aspirant, hoping to learn to enjoy highbrow culture, and the *Punch* writer's tone does not strike me as unsympathetic to this aspiration. However, Mary Grover analyses the quotation differently:

The sneer is comprehensive: at the gullible middling sorts who demonstrate their pitiable lack of cultural confidence in looking to the BBC to guide their vain attempts at self-education; at the BBC for taking the cultural aspirations of such

¹ Virginia Woolf, 'Middlebrow', in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1947), p. 115.

² *Oxford English Dictionary* <www.oed.com> [accessed 26 October 2006].

³ The first identified use of the term in print is in the Irish *Freeman's Journal*, 3 May 1924: 'Ireland's musical destiny, in spite of what the highbrows or middlebrows may say, is intimately bound up with the festivals.' *Oxford English Dictionary* <www.oed.com> [accessed 23 July 2009]. Unsurprisingly, the origins of the concept of the 'middlebrow' can be found long before the 1920s. Susan Bernstein has examined the emergence of a gendered and class-bound literary 'browing' in the 1860s, and Jennifer Shepherd, following the model explored by Teresa Mangum in *Married, Middlebrow, and Militant: Sarah Grand and the New Woman Novel* (1998), specifically identifies Elizabeth von Arnim's early novels (*Elizabeth and her German Garden* was published in 1898) as participating in the 19th century formation of a women's middlebrow culture.

consumers seriously; and at the assumptions of superiority amongst the highbrow guardians of British culture.⁴

Perhaps reading the *Punch* definition with a knowledge of the later use of the term one cannot help anticipating the sneer. Certainly this demonstrates that 'middlebrow' is an evaluative, pejorative term, yet those who developed its usage in the 1920s and 30s claimed an objective judgement. Q. D. Leavis's highly influential polemic *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) sought to examine public taste in reading through an in-depth study of the production of books, from the advice of editors, the machinations of promotion, to the recommendations of the assistant on the shop-floor. Leavis aims to be scientific – she terms her method 'anthropological'⁵ – claiming that the discussion of values will wait until the end of the book, after her body of evidence has been presented, but Leavis brings to bear on her study the full weight of an increasing pessimism and paranoia among the cultural elite she aims to be part of: she believes that literary culture is in a process of disintegration, soon to be dominated by the lowbrow pulp, and more threateningly, the middlebrow.

The establishment of the Book Society in 1927 caused Leavis particular concern. The Book Society chooses

novels of such competent journalists as G. B. Stern, A. P. Herbert, Rebecca West, Denis Mackail..., sapless 'literary' novels, or the smartly fashionable (Hemingway, Osbert Sitwell). By December 1929 the society had nearly seven thousand members, and it is still growing, from which the quite unbiased observer might fairly deduce two important cultural changes: first, that by conferring authority on a taste for the second-rate (to the Book Society the publication of *A Modern Comedy* is 'a real event in the story of modern English literature'⁶) a middlebrow standard of taste has been set up; second that middlebrow taste has thus been organised.⁷

Leavis's opinions and fears for the future are clearly expressed in this passage. The novelists recommended by the Book Society are judged to be merely 'competent journalists'; or, damning any claim to literary status 'smartly fashionable'; or, of those novels *with* a claim to literary status, 'sapless'. Added to this the Book Society's praise for the second volume of John Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga*, and Leavis can confidently

⁴ Mary Grover, *The Ordeal of Warwick Deeping: Middlebrow Authorship and Cultural Embarrassment* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2009), p. 36.

⁵ Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932; London: Pimlico, 2000), p. xxxv.

⁶ The second volume of John Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* (1929).

⁷ Leavis, p. 23-24.

write that the 'unbiased observer' will deduce the conferring of 'authority on a taste for the second-rate'. To Leavis the terms 'second-rate' and 'middlebrow' are almost interchangeable, and in her claim to unbiased observation (Leavis frequently invokes an 'impartial assessor' who 'cannot avoid concluding' to add credence to her judgements⁸) she allows no room for debate on the quality of these novelists. They are what she says they are, and with statements such as 'to the Book Society the publication of *A Modern Comedy* is "a real event in the story of modern English literature"' with its unspoken judgement that this is a clear indication of a taste for the second-rate, she assumes concurrence from her readers.

However, the observant observer will immediately notice that these novelists were not uncontestedly designated middlebrow. The very selection of novelists Leavis uses to illustrate middlebrow taste demonstrates the instability and subjectivity of the category. Rebecca West and Ernest Hemingway in particular were of interest and value to the highbrow 'critical minority' Leavis aims to represent.⁹ West was considered by many to be a 'serious' writer, yet it seems for Leavis she is tainted by journalism. Hemingway seems an even odder choice for middlebrow, but he did achieve some popular success and could indeed be considered fashionable, factors that are incompatible with Leavis's definition of literary value.

Leavis concludes with a comment loaded with portent: 'middlebrow taste has been organised'. She fears the middlebrow, imagining a dominance of the cultural marketplace increasing until her own 'critical minority' is squeezed out entirely. In contrast to Grover's analysis of *Punch*'s perspective in 1925, in 1932 Leavis laments what she sees as *Punch*'s 'markedly anti-highbrow' attitude:

This becomes serious when one remembers that whereas a century ago there was a solid body of opinion behind the Reviews, which organised and expressed the attitude of the cultured minority – 'no genteel family can pretend to be without it,' Scott wrote of the *Edinburgh Review* – perhaps the only periodical every genteel family can now be counted on to take is *Punch*.¹⁰

It appears that middlebrow organisation has been at the expense of the organisation of the 'cultured minority'. In *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (1930), F. R. Leavis,

⁸ Leavis, p. 39.

⁹ Leavis, p. 5.

¹⁰ Leavis, p. 194-95.

expressing the ideas that Q. D. developed, saw 'highbrow' itself as 'an ominous addition to the English language'. With this label, the cultured minority is 'now made conscious, not merely of an uncongenial, but of a hostile environment'.¹¹

At around the same time that Q. D. Leavis published *Fiction and the Reading Public*, Virginia Woolf was moved to write the other most famous contemporary statement on the subject: her letter 'Middlebrow', written, but never sent to *The New Statesman*.¹² Woolf defines the highbrow as 'the man or woman of thoroughbred intelligence who rides his mind at a gallop across country in pursuit of an idea'. The lowbrow, on the other hand, is 'a man or woman of thoroughbred vitality who rides his body in pursuit of a living at a gallop across life'. These groups 'honour' and 'need' each other equally; Woolf gives us the example of lowbrows going to the cinema to see themselves pursuing a living – as they are engaged in it, she argues, they cannot generally see themselves doing it. The highbrows (and clearly at this point the cinema is 'high') are the 'only ones who can show them'.¹³

This logic is immediately specious: 'lowbrow' cultural production does exist, yet Woolf assumes this group is not able to produce art to reflect its own experience, perhaps relying on the notion of co-dependence to protect her from charges of snobbery. Also by this logic, one would expect the middlebrow to be those who able to do both – live and pursue ideas, but this is not Woolf's conclusion. Middlebrows are

the go-between; they are the busybodies who run from one to the other with their tittle tattle and make all the mischief – the middlebrows, I repeat. But what, you may ask, is a middlebrow? And that, to tell the truth, is no easy question to answer. They are neither one thing nor the other. They are not highbrows, whose brows are high; nor lowbrows, whose brows are low.¹⁴

Logically their brows might be a happy mid-way, but this is instead a no-man's land: 'Their brows are betwixt and between'.¹⁵ This frequently quoted phrase, often used as a kind of definition, is in fact an expression of Woolf's difficulty in pinning down the

¹¹ F. R. Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (Cambridge: The Minority Press, 1930), p. 25.

¹² Virginia Woolf, 'Middlebrow' in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1947), pp. 113-119.

¹³ Woolf, p. 113, 114, 115.

¹⁴ Woolf, p. 115.

¹⁵ Woolf, p. 115.

middlebrow. She is only able to define it negatively, in terms of the high and lowbrow it is not.

But then we come to the crux of the matter: 'The middlebrow is 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 nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige'. Woolf's distaste is as strongly felt as that of Q. D. Leavis. If there were any doubts left as to Woolf's opinion, her concluding sentence dispels them: 'If any human being, man, woman, dog, cat or half-crushed worm dares call me "middlebrow" I will take my pen and stab him, dead'.¹⁶

There is another factor working against the recognition of middlebrow texts: gender. These are novels predominantly written by women for women. In identifying the reasons for the decline in the 'critical intelligence' of readers, Leavis notes significantly 'that women rather than men change the books (that is, determine the family reading)'.¹⁷ George Orwell, describing the novels most frequently borrowed from the bookshop he worked at in his youth, gives free rein to his snobbish misogyny:

Dell's novels, of course, are read solely by women, but by women of all kinds and ages, and not, as one might expect, merely by wistful spinsters and the fat wives of tobacconists. 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.¹⁸

Men, it is clear, exercise discernment in choosing their reading matter; women do not. Orwell expected romance novels to be read only by the lower classes, but finds that women of different classes are united in their readership of both romances and *average* - middlebrow - novels. Orwell unites too, with Q. D. Leavis in his opinion of John Galsworthy, who appears for both to have become a byword for 'second-rate'.

¹⁶ Woolf, p. 115, 119.

¹⁷ Q. D. Leavis, p. 7.

¹⁸ George Orwell, 'Bookshop Memories', in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker and Warburg, 1969), I, p. 244 (written 1936).

Galsworthy's Forsyte novels are that most old-fashioned type, the family saga: resolutely realist, domestic and enormously popular.¹⁹

The female middlebrow novel in modern criticism

Female middlebrow novelists still very rarely feature in conventional critical texts claiming to give an overview of the inter-war period, demonstrating that these novels have certainly not yet achieved established critical recognition and status (I will discuss their status in post-1945 criticism in a later section of this chapter, 'The persistence of the middlebrow: World War II and beyond'). Valentine Cunningham's 500 page book *British Writers of the Thirties* (1988), for example, devotes about a dozen pages to women writers, despite commenting that 'the novel, in the 1930s as in the whole period since the form established itself in Britain, was the classic medium of the woman writer', and that they 'cannot simply be left, as most books about the 1930s leave them, out of the account'.²⁰ He is disproportionately concerned with the literary establishment and the avant-garde; of the small space allotted, a large proportion is given to the standard female representative, Virginia Woolf, who can be most easily assimilated into a discussion of modernism. Janet Montefiore's *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s* (1996), intended to correct the 'gender-blind' accounts of the period such as Cunningham, does an excellent job of reinscribing women writers into the literary history of the 1930s, but her focus is on left-wing political literature, and middlebrow writers are specifically excluded.²¹ A positive exception is a volume of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Novelists Between the Wars* (1998). The editor, G. M. Johnson, comments that 'since most novelists writing between the wars were middle class and wrote for a middlebrow audience, the majority of those treated here are also middle class and middlebrow', and recognising the importance of women novelists, almost half of the entries are on women.²²

¹⁹ In 1922 Galsworthy's novels and short stories *The Man of Property*, 'Indian Summer of a Forsyte', *In Chancery*, 'Awakening', and *To Let* were published in one volume under the title *The Forsyte Saga*. Over one million copies were sold in Britain and America. See Sanford Sternlicht, 'John Galsworthy' in *The Literary Encyclopedia*, <<http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=1674>> [accessed 23 July 2009].

²⁰ Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 26.

²¹ Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 1, 21.

²² G. M. Johnson, ed., *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Novelists Between the Wars* (Detroit: Brucoli Clark Layman, 1998), p. xxv.

While female (or male) middlebrow novelists rarely appear in conventional critical texts, in the 1990s there were several groundbreaking studies that analysed the emergence of the ‘middlebrow’: in America Joan Rubin’s *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (1992) and John Guillory’s *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993); in the UK Rosa Maria Bracco’s *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War, 1919-1939* (1993) and John Carey’s *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992). In the past few years there has been a surge of interest in the middlebrow, building on these important texts. Scholars have found examinations of print cultures to be particularly productive; there are new studies looking specifically at women writers, and an increasing number of single-author studies.²³ The AHRC-funded Middlebrow Network, established in 2008, has developed a database of over 115 scholars with a research interest in the middlebrow, and a mailing list of over 200 members.²⁴ The network has thus far published a special edition of *Working Papers on the Web* ‘Investigating the Middlebrow’; a special ‘middlebrow’ edition of *Modernist Cultures*, and an edited collection *Middlebrow Literary Cultures* are also forthcoming.²⁵ The network aims, as I wrote in my introduction to ‘Investigating the Middlebrow’, to ‘demonstrate the importance of interrogating, rather than dismissing, the value-laden category “middlebrow”’.²⁶

Despite this surge of interest, there remain three key critical texts addressing the specifically female middlebrow novel of the interwar years in Britain: Nicola Beauman’s *A Very Great Profession: The Woman’s Novel 1914-39* (1983); Alison Light’s *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*

²³ See for example Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier, eds, *Transatlantic Print Culture 1880-1940: Emerging Media, Emerging Modernisms* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith, eds, *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003) and Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity and Literary Culture Between the Wars* (Austin: University of Texas, 2007); Wendy Pollard, *Rosamond Lehmann and Her Critics: The Vagaries of Literary Reception* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), Ina Habermann, *Myth, Memory and the Middlebrow: Priestley, du Maurier and the Symbolic Form of Englishness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and Mary Grover, *The Ordeal of Warwick Deeping: Middlebrow Authorship and Cultural Embarrassment* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2009).

²⁴ The network was developed by Faye Hammill, Erica Brown and Mary Grover. See <www.middlebrow-network.com>.

²⁵ The vibrancy of this emerging research area is also evidenced by the increasing frequency of ‘middlebrow’ conferences, and panels at larger conferences, for example: ‘High and Low Culture’ panel at the Midwestern Modern Languages Association convention 2006; several panels at the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing conference 2009; ‘The Middlebrow Lexicon’ panel at the Modernist Studies Association 2009; ‘Investigating the Middlebrow’ at Sheffield Hallam University 2007; ‘Historicising the Middlebrow’ at Sheffield University 2008; ‘Middlebrow Cultures’ at Strathclyde University 2009.

²⁶ Erica Brown, Introduction, ‘Investigating the Middlebrow’, *Working Papers on the Web*, vol 11 (July 2008) <<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/middlebrow/index.html>> [Accessed 7 July 2009], no page numbers.

(1991) and Nicola Humble's *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism* (2001).²⁷

Nicola Beauman's *A Very Great Profession* (1983) was inspired by watching the character of Laura Jesson in *Brief Encounter* going every week to town to shop, go to the cinema and change her library book. Laura borrows the latest Kate O'Brien, and Beauman wishes to know what else the 'respectable married woman with a husband and a home and three children'²⁸ has been reading, and to learn more about her life. However, despite the stated dual aim of examining both the lives of middle-class women, and trends in this audience's reading, *A Very Great Profession* does not examine trends in publishing and readership in detail. Beauman focuses instead on reading novels as a way to document previously neglected social history: '*A Very Great Profession* tries [...] to present a portrait through their fiction of English middle-class women during the period between the two world wars'.²⁹ Her book thus only touches in passing on issues of style, form or technique and centres instead on the subject matter of the novels considered.

Beauman argues that there is a category of fiction written between the wars for women – not all are written by women,

but the majority were, and they all have an unmistakably female tone of voice. They generally have little action and less histrionics – they are about the "drama of the undramatic", the steadfast dailiness of a life that brings its own rewards, the intensity of the emotions and above all, the importance of human relationships.³⁰

This is Beauman's 'woman's novel'; the term middlebrow is used briefly and remains unexamined. Alison Light, in her study of women's fiction between the wars, argues

²⁷ Another extremely useful text, but one with a different, wider focus is Anthea Trodd's *Women's Writing in English: Britain 1900-1945* (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998). Trodd uses 'documentarist fiction' to represent the middlebrow, dividing them into three types: those communicating topical issues (Storm Jameson, Winifred Holtby, Lettice Cooper, Phyllis Bottome); rural writers looking at loss of contact with the countryside (Constance Holme, Mary Webb, Sheila Kaye-Smith) and historical novelists (Naomi Mitchison, Margaret Irwin, Marjorie Bowen). Despite outlining 'the battle of the brows' in her introduction, this selection of novels does not include those I would consider representatively middlebrow and thus Trodd sidesteps the issues the middlebrow novel raises. Addressing American female middlebrow writers of this period is Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith (eds), *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s* (Boston, Northeastern University Press, 2003).

²⁸ Laura describes herself thus in *Still Life* (1935), the Noel Coward play on which *Brief Encounter* (directed by David Lean, Rank, 1945) is based.

²⁹ Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1983), p. 3.

³⁰ Beauman, p. 5.

that a key legacy of modernism is to turn the attention away from 'home' and any feelings of belonging rather than exile. Examining Paul Fussell's account of male writers between the wars who rejected notions of home, Light argues, reveals a sense of wounded masculine pride. 'Driven into exile, many modernist prophets and minor cognoscenti lament both the proletarianisation and the domestication of national life. Since war, whatever its horrors, is manly, there is something both lower-class and effeminate about peacetime.'³¹ Light persuasively suggests that Fussell's account is an example of the many ways in which aesthetic judgments are intertwined with those about gender. For Fussell truly literary culture is inseparable from masculinity, and thus the feminine is 'implicitly associated with the "middlebrow", a term always bordering on contempt'³².

Working with broadly the same definition as Beaman has used for her 'woman's novel', Nicola Humble uses the term middlebrow in a new way: while Beaman and Light use it briefly, Humble's aim is to rehabilitate both the term and the body of work she explicitly identifies as middlebrow. Humble persuasively argues that accepted critical terms 'Modernism' and 'the Auden generation' are 'convenient literary fictions' that leave little space for the writers the majority of people read from the 1920s to the 1950s: Elizabeth Bowen, Rosamond Lehmann, Rose Macaulay, Elizabeth Taylor, and none at all for the writers Humble terms 'frivolous': Stella Gibbons, Dodie Smith and Nancy Mitford.³³ Humble's claim that these novelists have been disproportionately neglected is routinely supported by the claim that these are the novels that 'the majority of people read'. These are the novels, Humble states, that 'made the Book-of-the-Month lists in the newspapers, sold in their tens of thousands in book club editions, and packed the shelves of the lending libraries'.³⁴ This assertion is not substantiated by quantitative evidence, and the focus of Humble's book is in fact not the popular fiction that 'the majority of people read'. She does not intend to discuss other categories of bestseller - the popular romance, or the detective novel, but the literature popular with a particular group: the middle-class woman.³⁵

³¹ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 7. See also Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

³² Light, p. 7.

³³ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 2.

³⁴ Humble, p. 3.

³⁵ Popular pulp fiction has received more academic attention than the middlebrow, though it is notable that most has come from Cultural Studies departments, rather than English Literature. For example Clive

Humble argues that the middlebrow novel is not a newly emerging literary form in the 1920s, but is a critical term emerging as a consequence of contemporary literary developments:

The stylistic and thematic blue-prints of the sort of literature that came to be seen as middlebrow – a particular concentration on feminine aspects of life, a fascination with domestic space, a concern with courtship and marriage, a preoccupation with aspects of class and manners – are little different from the conventions that dominated the mainstream novel throughout the nineteenth century (we need only think of Austen and the Brontës, Trollope and Charlotte M. Yonge). It is not (as many critics would have us assume) that novelists, and particularly female novelists, suddenly started writing meretricious, class-obsessed fripperies in the years after the First World War, but rather that the status of the realist novel was dramatically altered by the coming to public consciousness of the modernist and associated avant-garde movements.³⁶

I think it is important to recognise that the emergence of new movements in culture does not *necessarily* entail a consequent loss of status for existing forms, as this quotation by Humble, and her earlier statement that ‘Modernism’ left ‘little space’ for popular fiction, could imply. The loss of status of fiction subsequently labelled middlebrow is the consequence of the exercising of power and exclusion by a cultural elite, and those, such as Q. D. Leavis, seeking to build a canon of ‘English literature’ suitable for analysis by the new, academically-disciplined literary critic. Tory Young puts it baldly: ‘English literature as a university subject was constructed *against* middlebrow fiction’.³⁷ Middlebrow literature is thus not simply ignored or neglected; it is actively rejected and labelled as unsuitable for the academy. Douglas Hewitt argues that the natural tendency of the academic critic is to ‘concentrate attention upon what they themselves can do and what the general reader cannot’ – theorise ‘difficult’ works – having ‘the effect of making the tradition of modernism seem not merely one tendency among a number but the only one’.³⁸ And, Light has argued, modernism is gendered, associating literary value with masculinity and exile, and devaluing the feminine and domestic as middlebrow. It could be argued that the emergence of ‘difficult’ modernism provided

Bloom, *Cult Fiction, Popular Reading and Pulp Theory* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), Scott McCracken, *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

³⁶ Humble, p. 11.

³⁷ Tory Young, ‘Torrents of Trash’, *Cambridge Quarterly*, 33 (2004), 187-189 (p. 187).

³⁸ Douglas Hewitt, *English Fiction of the Early Modern Period 1890-1940* (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman, 1988), p. 170-171.

the opportunity necessary for development of academic literary criticism, and thus academic English's very foundations are unsuited to the analysis of middlebrow texts.

However, this opposition is not one-way. Janice Radway argues that in America, middlebrow culture itself participated in this separation and antipathy. She finds the practices of the American Book-of-the-Month Club to be 'implicitly constructed with an eye towards academic ways of evaluating books. Middlebrow culture, apparently, defined itself, first, against academic ways of seeing'.³⁹ Radway argues that rather than aping the values of high culture, the middlebrow Book-of-the-Month Club editors are exercising a kind of counter-practice in which they are a competitor to university English in defining literary value. Their 'general reader' is set up in opposition to the professional academic reader. The English Book Guild in the 1930s had similar aims: Q. D. Leavis quotes an advertisement which proclaims the Book Guild to be 'an organisation which would cater for the ordinary intelligent reader, not for the highbrows – an organisation which would realise that *a book can have a good story and a popular appeal and yet be good literature*'.⁴⁰ This may seem reasonable, but to commentators like Leavis and Woolf popularity is incompatible with literary value. The mission statement of the Guild is also threatening, perhaps because the aspirant middlebrow of the 1925 *Punch* article has developed into something both commercially driven, and operating in opposition to the highbrow.

These analyses of the developments in literary culture at this time are supported by the fact that the term 'middlebrow' first made an appearance in the 1920s, lagging some forty years behind 'highbrow' (1884) and twenty years behind 'lowbrow' (1906).⁴¹ Further, these are cultural conditions, particularly class conditions, specific to Britain: while 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' are originally American colloquial terms, 'middlebrow' has a specifically British meaning, which differs significantly from the American. The *OED* definition accepts middlebrow as a straightforward descriptive term, but the Oxford American, Canadian and Australian dictionaries are carefully

³⁹ Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), p. 9.

⁴⁰ Q. D. Leavis, p. 24.

⁴¹ *Oxford English Dictionary* <www.oed.com> [accessed 29 December 2006] gives the earliest usage of 'highbrow' in 1884: 'Mr. Hope had suggested that we would be at some highbrow part of the Exhibition - looking at pictures I think, but Jo had said firmly, 'If I know the Troubridges they will be at the Chocolate Stall', and we were!' L. Troubridge, *Life amongst Troubridges* (1966) xii. p. 169. The earliest usage of 'lowbrow' is 1906: 'The spaghetti works was in full blast, with a lot of husky low-brows goin' in and out.' S. Ford, *Shorty McCabe* iii. p. 64.

distant, all defining middlebrow as 'claiming to be or regarded as only moderately intellectual'.⁴² These dictionaries clearly imply that this is a label, a subjective judgement, and as such cannot be regarded as an objective description of the true nature of a person or work. The American Merriam-Webster dictionary however, defines middlebrow as 'a person who is moderately but not highly cultivated',⁴³ thus accepting the middlebrow judgement, but not elaborating the definition in terms of value, as the *OED* does.

Definitions of the middlebrow continue to be a confused mixture of theme, style, popularity and readership. Nicola Humble identifies the characteristics of middlebrow, but then problematises the term by suggesting that novels were not judged to be middlebrow because of any intrinsic qualities, but because of their readership. Novels that became widely popular were immediately suspect, and further, those labelled middlebrow were written largely by women, and widely popular with a specific readership: the middle-class woman.⁴⁴ While tracing commonalities and defining this type of novel, Humble draws attention to the diversity of texts labelled middlebrow: from the intellectual Elizabeth Bowen to the humourist P.G. Wodehouse; they are grouped together as middlebrow because of their readership. There is a tension between middlebrow as an identifiable type, and as a pejorative label applied through prejudice towards the readership, which is not resolved by Humble's book.

Humble is careful not to define middlebrow as a genre: 'the middlebrow literature of this period encompassed a wide range of genres, including romances and country-house sagas, detective stories, children's books, comic narratives, domestic novels, and adolescent Bildungsroman'.⁴⁵ The term is applied because the book has become popular with a particular readership, and Humble notes that this allows us to pinpoint when a book 'became' middlebrow 'and examine the ways in which their social status shifted as a result'.⁴⁶ However, she wants to suggest that these novels have more in common than being tarred with the same brush of disapproval: 'the label middlebrow allows us to move outside the boundaries of genre to trace the shared qualities of the leisure

⁴² From the *Oxford American Dictionary of Current English*, the *Australian Oxford Dictionary*, the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* <www.oxfordreference.com> [accessed 20 March 2007]

⁴³ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* <www.m-w.com/dictionary> [accessed 20 March 2007].

⁴⁴ Humble, p. 13.

⁴⁵ Humble, p. 12.

⁴⁶ Humble, p. 13.

reading of a class in the process of being remade'.⁴⁷ Middlebrow is thus not a genre, but a 'category of leisure reading', characterised by breadth and hybridity, and feminine in the sense that it is primarily read by women and in some sense addressed to women.⁴⁸

Despite the clear similarity with Humble's 'feminine middlebrow', Beauman escapes these tensions by defining her focus as the 'woman's novel'. She focuses almost entirely on subject matter so can happily include modernist Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* (1915), *Night and Day* (1919) and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). However, in her analysis the 'woman's novel' has been overlooked because of its subject matter – middle-class women's domestic lives – so how do we account for the critical status of these novels? While Beauman recognises Woolf's exceptional status among women writers of this period, this question is not addressed, as the term middlebrow and its pejorative meaning is not addressed.

Beauman begins her chapter 'Romance' by noting:

The novels which Laura Jesson or Mrs Miniver or the Provincial Lady borrowed once a week from Boots were firmly middlebrow. No woman with intellectual pretensions (the 'professional' woman or the university-educated) would have read them, preferring Huxley or Woolf and, at a pinch, Rosamond Lehmann and Elizabeth Bowen. Only with detective fiction (Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie) would their tastes have overlapped – here middlebrow and highbrow would have presented a concerted front in opposition to romantic or 'Came the Dawn' novels.⁴⁹

With one of her few uses of the term 'middlebrow' Beauman's introduction to her chapter on romance aims to differentiate brows of novels through readership and places romance novels as firmly 'lowbrow'. The middle-class Laura Jesson would never read them,⁵⁰ and thus this chapter sits oddly with Beauman's stated aim of presenting the middle-class English woman through their fiction. Beauman also identifies Bowen and

⁴⁷ Humble, p. 13.

⁴⁸ Humble, p. 14. The difficulties of defining a culturally constructed pejorative category of literature are not new. Susan Bernstein observes that "sensation fiction" describes much less a cohesive literature style or genre than a critical construction coined by the watch-dogs of dominant culture'. Indeed, the roots of the interwar concerns about class and gender can be traced back to the 1870s: 'the critical discourse on sensation fiction is also a debate about cultural power at a historical moment of expanding literacy when women and a rising middle class inundated the literary market-place'. Bernstein, 'Dirty Reading: Sensation Fiction, Women and Primitivism', *Criticism* 36. 2 (1994), p. 222.

⁴⁹ Beauman, p. 173.

⁵⁰ Or perhaps George Orwell was right and all classes of women read romances, and Beauman is snobbishly unable to openly acknowledge this.

Lehmann here as outside middlebrow and on the edge of highbrow acceptability. Humble's decision to include them in the grouping 'feminine middlebrow' is questionable. As Patricia Craig writes in the introduction to *The Death of the Heart* (1938), the book 'nearly made Elizabeth Bowen a popular, as well as an acclaimed, author' (my italics).⁵¹ Bowen was certainly critically appreciated, but I am not sure she achieved popularity, even with Humble's selected readership of middle-class women. Some incidental comments by Beauman on bestsellers are revealing. She describes A. S. M. Hutchison's *This Freedom* (1922) as facile and sentimental, but having 'wide popular appeal'.

In the manner of bestselling fiction, the author flits from one moral stance to another, declaring roundly against one and then another, caring nothing for consistency but concerned only with airing all the arguments. [...] It may be a necessary ingredient of bestsellers that they do not offend anyone, paying lip service first to one, then another; but the end result always appears unprovocative.⁵²

Beauman knows, from her discussion of circulating libraries and book clubs that many of the 'woman's novels' she appreciates also have 'wide popular appeal' but clearly popularity is still suspect. I would suggest that she does not identify her novels as middlebrow because she is prone to make unexamined pejorative judgements about popular novels herself. She does not intend to examine the popular, middlebrow novel, but the woman's domestic novel – thus including Virginia Woolf – and keeping herself securely removed from a full examination of the meanings and construction of 'middlebrow'.

Interestingly, there is on one occasion an implied but unacknowledged understanding that the 'woman's novel' differs from the experimental, modernist Woolf. Beauman describes Rosamond Lehmann's *The Weather in the Streets* (1936) as

a superb novel which uses some of the methods of Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf but moulds them into the form of 'a woman's novel' in the sense in which the phrase is used in the sub-title of this book. For it is a novel which draws on established literary techniques but handles them

⁵¹ Patricia Craig, introduction to Elizabeth Bowen, *The Death of the Heart* (1938; London: Vintage, 1998), p. 4.

⁵² Beauman, p. 73.

without obscurity or evasiveness to create a whole which manages to be readable and moving without being trite and self-indulgent.⁵³

Oddly, having in the previous paragraphs described the strengths and shortcomings of the innovative psychoanalytic novels of Richardson and Sinclair, it appears that Beuman is arguing that their 'stream of consciousness' styles are established techniques that Lehmann then draws on to create the 'readable' 'woman's novel'. Despite this strange judgement, these comments do draw attention to the middlebrow novel's relationship to other literary movements and styles. Whilst Beuman's analysis is odd, it is the case that Lehmann drew on popular, middlebrow and highbrow forms and styles. *The Weather in the Street* also uses the romance narrative, but not in the mechanical form that detractors of romances, like Leavis, critique. This was a vexed point for Q. D. Leavis. While hating contemporary middlebrow uses of highbrow forms, in her analysis of the supposed literary purity of the pre-industrial age her judgements are different:

when a Mrs Haywood sat down to write a novel she could produce admirable fiction, because she was in touch with the best work of her age; the Mrs Haywoods changed their technique as soon as a Richardson or a Sterne provided them with a new one.⁵⁴

The writers of contemporary bestsellers, she argues, do not change their course because of what Lawrence, Woolf or Joyce have written, as they and their readers have probably never heard of them. Furthermore, unlike in the homogenous literary society that Leavis claims for the 18th century, the 1930s popular novelist purposefully distances himself from the 'good' literature of the 'critical minority'.

The 'middling novel', she writes, is

all on the traditional model, and therefore easy to respond to, yet with an appearance of originality; they deal in soothing and not disturbing sentiments, yet with sufficient surface stimulus to be pleasing [...] their readers are left with the agreeable sensation of having improved themselves without incurring fatigue.⁵⁵

⁵³ Beuman, p. 155.

⁵⁴ Leavis, p. 131.

⁵⁵ Leavis, p. 36-37.

In her rapidly collapsing logic, pre-industrial popular writers used highbrow literature to good effect, whereas contemporary popular writers use highbrow forms only to give an appearance of originality, a practice that Leavis derides. At the same time, popular writers do not pay enough attention to the highbrow, to their great detriment.

The question of where 'middlebrow' ends and 'popular' and 'highbrow' begin clearly has no objective answer. In addressing the problem Humble makes some strikingly similar observations to Leavis, while coming to a positive rather than a negative, Leavisite, conclusion:

The broad working definition I employ throughout this book is that the middlebrow novel is one that straddles the divide between the trashy romance or thriller on the one hand, and the philosophically or formally challenging novel on the other: offering narrative excitement without guilt, and intellectual stimulation without undue effort. It is an essentially parasitical form, dependent on the existence of both a high and a low brow for its identity, reworking their structures and aping their insights, while at the same time fastidiously holding its skirts away from lowbrow contamination, and gleefully mocking highbrow intellectual pretensions.⁵⁶

So Humble argues that while the conventions of the middlebrow novel may be little different from those of the mainstream nineteenth century novel, the middlebrow is shaped by its cultural context of high and lowbrow literature, even dependent on it. It is, therefore, a culturally and historically specific form. I would argue that, broad and hybrid though it is, middlebrow novels do constitute a distinct category of literature. John Baxendale argues that to use the term middlebrow is to 'accept the way that that particular discourse constructs cultural reality'.⁵⁷ Whilst I'm sympathetic to the spirit of this comment, I think the term is useful if it is used critically. 'Middlebrow' gives us a context, and a way to explore the circumstances of these novels' production and reception. Prejudices of class and gender gave it its derogatory label, one which most of the novelists themselves would not have accepted, but the middlebrow had an identity, with clear lines of development traceable to demonstrate that these novelists were highly aware of their contemporaries' work, the commonalities between them, and their relationship to the high and low brow. As Faye Hammill argues, 'the term 'middlebrow', in order to be an effective critical category for the consideration of

⁵⁶ Humble, p. 11-12.

⁵⁷ John Baxendale, "Middlebrow" writing and the social imaginary between the wars' (unpublished conference paper, North American Conference on British Studies 2006), p.2.

interwar literature, needs to be [...] reconstituted as a productive, affirmative standpoint for writers who were not wholly aligned with either high modernism or popular culture'.⁵⁸ In this thesis I will be adopting Humble's term 'feminine middlebrow' to categorise von Arnim and Taylor's novels.

Like Nicola Beauman, Alison Light also attempts to understand the past through novels, but she offers a much more sophisticated analysis of what that might mean. *Forever England* (1991) is a feminist history which takes the literary and the subjective into account, asking 'what the past might look like once we begin to make histories of the emotions, of the economies which organize what is felt and lived as a personal life but which is always inescapably a social life'. Novels, she notes, do not give us a single argument, but a medley of different voices, languages and positions.⁵⁹ However, Light argues that women's fiction between the wars goes to the heart of a particular tension in English social life in the interwar years. While masculinity and the ideas of the nation were being 'feminised', many women were reacting against the ideologies of home and femininity from the pre-war world. Light terms this tension 'conservative modernity': simultaneously looking backwards and forwards; 'it could accommodate the past in the new forms of the present; it was a deferral of modernity and yet it also demanded a different sort of conservatism from that which had gone before'.⁶⁰

As Humble suggests, Light's conclusions are perhaps slightly ambitious given her limited, but disparate selection of novelists: Light's book considers Ivy Compton-Burnett, detective writer Agatha Christie, Daphne Du Maurier and journalist Jan Struther's creation, *Mrs Miniver*. I consider Light's excellent work to be best appreciated as examining in detail a particular facet of the female interwar novel, rather than a convincing case that all novelists share this theme. Light's 'conservative modernity' does in fact share elements with Humble's own conclusion that the feminine middlebrow is an ideologically flexible form, paradoxically allied to both domesticity and a radical sophistication, making it 'a powerful force in establishing and consolidating, but also in resisting, new class and gender identities'.⁶¹ Both demonstrate

⁵⁸ Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity and Literary Culture Between the Wars* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), p. 6.

⁵⁹ Light, p. 5, 2.

⁶⁰ Light, p. 10.

⁶¹ Humble, p. 3.

the mixture of conservative and radical forces within middlebrow literature; while Humble finds a balance between them, Light sees an overall conservatism.

Until recently, the majority of middlebrow female writers who have received detailed attention have been approached from a different, more acceptable angle. Feminist scholars have reassessed Storm Jameson and Winifred Holtby with a focus on their left-wing political agenda; the definitions of modernism have been judged to be too narrowly masculine, and have been extended to accept many women writers into the modernist fold.⁶² However, with the surge of interest in the middlebrow in the last few years there have been more studies on middlebrow female writers that explicitly explore the middlebrow label, such as Wendy Pollard's exemplary *Rosamond Lehmann and Her Critics: The Vagaries of Literary Reception* (2004), Lisa Regan's essay collection *Winifred Holtby, "A Woman in Her Time": Critical Essays* (2010) and building upon Humble's work, Hilary Hinds' article 'Ordinary Disappointments: Femininity, Domesticity, and Nation in British Middlebrow Fiction, 1920-1944' (2009). New categories have been constructed: Kristin Bluemel has coined the term 'intermodernism'⁶³ and Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei have offered 'domestic modernism'.⁶⁴ However, feminist cultural historians Lucy Delap and Maria DiCenzo warn that:

even in addressing the ways in which traditional understandings of modernism either omitted, obscured, or marginalized important contributions and tendencies, these attempts to "rethink" and "rechart" modernism, according to Deborah Jacobs, "constitute less a *recharting* than an enlarging of the same old

⁶² For example, Elizabeth Maslen's *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction, 1928-1968* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001) and Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (London: Routledge, 1996). More positively, Mary Joannou, ed., *Women Writers of the 1930s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999) covers middlebrow writers (including Elizabeth von Arnim) and explicitly notes that a demarcation between realist works and experimental modernism is artificial. For the feminist revision of modernism see, for example: Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia L. Smyers, *Writing for Their Lives: The Modernist Women 1910-1940* (London: Women's Press, 1987); Bonnie Kime Scott, ed., *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

⁶³ Bluemel 'advocates adoption of a new vocabulary of intermodernism in order to disrupt the bad habits and intellectually limiting frameworks that have blinded us to the diversity and dynamism of literature connecting the 1930s and 1940s'. Kristin Bluemel, *George Orwell and the Radical Eccentrics: Intermodernism in Literary London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 165, 6. See also Kristin Bluemel, *Intermodernism: Writing and Culture in Interwar and Wartime Britain* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), and adopting this term Lucy Le-Guilcher and Phyllis Lassner, eds, *Rumer Godden: International and Intermodern Storyteller* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

⁶⁴ Briganti and Mezei persuasively detail the 'inventive narrative strategies' with which certain women writers utilise to examine women's domestic lives, but I am not convinced that these strategies constitute a 'modernism'. Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, *Domestic Modernism, the Interwar Novel and E.H. Young* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 2.

chart, less a *rethinking* than a revaluation of a formerly neglected or disparaged half of the same old modernist thought.”⁶⁵

Similarly, Nancy Paxton argues that extending the definition of modernism for this purpose ‘capitulates to the hegemonic power of the term “modernist”, and fails to consider how these “lost” texts draw from other traditions that are currently stigmatized as ‘non-modernist’.⁶⁶ In *Outside Modernism* (2000) Paxton and Hapgood challenge this ‘modernist’/‘non-modernist’ dichotomy, recognising the realist writers who also struggled to set a new literary agenda in the early twentieth century, and the common ground shared with modernist writers. In demonstrating middlebrow texts’ relationship to different literary techniques and movements, Humble has termed this a ‘hybrid’ form. Paxton and Hapgood however, while not specifically addressing the middlebrow, make a bolder claim in these essays for innovation in realist texts. Hapgood also argues, as I do in this thesis, that writing in the 19th century realist tradition has democratic and radical potential.

Their approach - to ‘reassess important English novels that have been excluded from the modernist canon or have been inadequately assessed by the artistic standards developed to legitimize the study of literary modernism’ is laudable, but it is perhaps telling that Paxton and Hapgood have still found it necessary to structure their analysis in relation to modernism.⁶⁷ The title *Outside Modernism* may indicate the undifferentiated categorisation of non-modernist writers, but it also continues to benefit from the increased recognition and status that the academic community will still give to a project relating to modernism, rather than middlebrow literature.

There are a number of critical studies of Elizabeth Bowen and Rose Macaulay, of which Humble observes ‘the approach has been to lift the writer away from the besmirching association with other middlebrow writers in order to claim them as ‘serious’.⁶⁸ Of Bowen, as I noted earlier, it can be argued that she has always been taken seriously, but

⁶⁵ Lucy Delap and Maria DiCenzo, ‘Transatlantic Print Culture: The Anglo-American Feminist Press and Emerging “Modernities”’ in Ann Ardis and Patrick Collier, eds, *Transatlantic Print Culture, 1880-1940: Emerging Media, Emerging Modernisms* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 50. Quoting Deborah Jacobs, ‘Feminist Criticism/Cultural Studies/Modernist Texts: A Manifesto for the ‘90s’ in Lisa Rado, ed., *Rereading Modernism: New Directions in Feminist Criticism* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), p. 273-74.

⁶⁶ Nancy L. Paxton, ‘Eclipsed by Modernism’ in Hapgood and Paxton, eds, *Outside Modernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 10.

⁶⁷ Paxton, p. 3.

⁶⁸ Humble, p. 2.

the point is valid for the great majority of the writers considered. In introducing her project, Light notes that while scholars of other literary periods are expected to understand the culture as a whole – studying Dickens, for example, one needs to have a knowledge of contemporary journalism and serial publication – this is not the case for 20th century literary criticism. Instead there are ‘endless attempts to find a canonical literature rather than in allowing a wider or more generous view of literary pleasures and readership’.⁶⁹ I think Light has given an explanation in her own objection; in a literary studies striving for rigour, ‘generosity’ and ‘pleasure’ have no place.

Janice Radway obliquely makes a similar point when examining her motivation for her ‘highly personal’ investigation into the American Book-of-the-Month Club. She notes that her passionate pleasure in reading felt when she was a young subscriber is never matched by the literary canon she learns to appreciate at grad school. In the past ‘the act of reading was propelled more by a driving desire to know, to connect, to communicate and to share than by the desires to evaluate, to explicate, to explain, to discriminate and to judge’.⁷⁰ Books sometimes transport Radway to a trancelike state that ‘manages to override my rational, trained approach to books as crafted objects’.⁷¹ Her comments suggest to me a highly ironic contradiction at the heart of academic literary criticism. A passionate engagement with books is probably what leads most academics into their profession, but it seems to be incompatible with it. Can one both read critically and be transported? Radway does not address this possible incompatibility, but suggests that the critical approach is not equipped to deal with this experience: ‘critical, analytical languages fail to do justice to the extreme specificity and idiosyncratic character of this experience, which I have heard the novelist Reynolds Price describes as a state of “narrative hypnosis”’.⁷² An interesting aspect to Q. D. Leavis is that, despite her claims to objectivity, and her distaste for the ‘drug habit’ of middlebrow reading,⁷³ she appears to have the kind of passion for the highbrow that others have for the middlebrow. For her, the academic literary canon is a passionate project; in contrast to the intellectual distance with which most of us approach academic English, as opposed to ‘reading for pleasure’.

⁶⁹ Light, p. x.

⁷⁰ Radway, p. 7.

⁷¹ Radway, p. 13.

⁷² Radway, p. 13.

⁷³ Leavis, p. 19.

Virginia Woolf joins a Book Club: the myth of the self-contained avant-garde

A recurring theme in this discussion of the middlebrow is the *construction* of culture: I have suggested that literary culture is a site of competing discourses and ideologies. The version of literary history that elevates the modernist movement above all others, and presents avant-garde groups like the Bloomsburries as self-contained, autonomous movements, as exemplified by Cunningham's *British Writers of the Thirties* (1988), is deeply disrupted by returning to primary contemporary sources.

Part of the continued critical fascination with Virginia Woolf is due to her delightful ambivalence and fluidity of thought. Her 'Middlebrow' letter, so authoritatively expressed, does not represent her 'final word' on the subject. Woolf's letters show her to be part of a literary community that spread far beyond the confines of the Bloomsbury set, and that she read and appreciated novels regarded as middlebrow. It is interesting to speculate on the reason why Woolf didn't send this letter to the *New Statesman*: she spared her target with a cruel relish more usually reserved for her private letters; so did she, on reflection, think it not suitable for publication? Did she think further on the matter and no longer feel so sure of her conclusions? It might have upset the single-minded Q. D. Leavis to know that in 1928 Woolf wrote a very friendly letter to the prolific middlebrow novelist Hugh Walpole, where she mentions she is 'trying to fan up some interest in other people's writings and have subscribed to the Times Book Club'.⁷⁴ Clearly, even highbrow Bloomsbury experimentalists need help choosing books sometimes.

Woolf read widely, including novels by such middlebrow writers as Arnold Bennett, Viola Meynell, Stella Benson, Hugh Walpole, E. H. Young, and indeed Elizabeth von Arnim.⁷⁵ She wrote to Ethel Smyth 'I shall lie and dip into Elizabeth R: who makes me

⁷⁴ Virginia Woolf, Letter to Hugh Walpole, 1 July 1928, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Nigel Nicholson, 6 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977), III, p. 512.

⁷⁵ Similarly, Talia Schaffer notes that 'though today we may see the late-Victorian period [when von Arnim began her career] as consisting of separate clumps of aesthetes, naturalists, New Women, decadents, canonical authors, popular novelists, and so forth, it is vital to remember that during this period these writers enjoyed multiple, flexible, social, and professional networks'. *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 16.

shout with laughter. Some of her sayings are tophe: as good as Dickens'.⁷⁶ That Woolf knew many of the same people as Elizabeth von Arnim, including Smyth, E. M. Forster, Hugh Walpole and Ottoline Morrell, is evidenced in her letters. Ethel Smyth was friends with von Arnim before she became close to Woolf, and Woolf was keen to hear about her: 'I want to talk and talk and talk – About music; about love; about Countess Russell. Don't you think you might indulge me this once and tell me what she said that's so interesting?'⁷⁷ It is not merely that Woolf shared social connections with Arnim. She also respected her work: 'I'm dumbfounded [sic] by Lady R. If ever hate and scorn were written on a woman's face I read them on her's. But then I'm not a novelist; and I'm awfully glad to be mistook; because she *is* a novelist and commands my deep respect.'⁷⁸ Ironically it appears that the respect flowed one way: from Bloomsbury Woolf to popular von Arnim.

It may be that Woolf did not consider von Arnim to be a middlebrow, for she could be so cruelly merciless about those she considered to be 'lady novelists' that the 'Middlebrow' letter appears mild and restrained. Rose Macaulay was a recurrent target:

Some houses have gone too far to be repaired – she is one. If we had rescued her before she was 30 – but she is now 45 – has lived with the riff raff of South Kensington culture for 15 years; become a successful lady novelist, and is rather jealous, spiteful and uneasy about Bloomsbury; can talk of nothing but reviews, yet being the daughter of a Cambridge Don, knows she shouldn't; and has her tail between her legs [...] All this fame that writers get is obviously the devil; I am not so nice as I was, but I am nicer than Rose Macaulay – also she is a spindle shanked withered virgin: I never felt anyone so utterly devoid of the sexual parts.⁷⁹

It is all very unpleasant. In Woolf's view Macaulay's writing is mixed 'rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige', as she described in her 'Middlebrow' letter.⁸⁰ Yet, as so often happens, the qualities that Woolf deplores in Macaulay were seen in herself. Woolf was characterised as sexless; but surely unwelcome recognition alone

⁷⁶ Virginia Woolf, Letter to Ethel Smyth, 5 Sept 1930, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Nigel Nicholson, 6 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977), III, p. 209. After her marriage in 1916 to Earl Francis Russell, Elizabeth von Arnim was known as Lady Elizabeth Russell.

⁷⁷ Woolf, Letter to Ethel Smyth, 27th Feb 1930, *Letters*, IV, p. 145.

⁷⁸ Woolf, Letter to Ethel Smyth, 1 March 1930, *Letters*, IV, p. 147. Unfortunately there is no other reference to what sounds like a memorable meeting.

⁷⁹ Woolf, Letter to Vanessa Bell, 25 May 1928, *Letters*, III, p. 501.

⁸⁰ Woolf, 'Middlebrow', p. 115.

could not generate such misogynistic vitriol? And fame may be 'the devil' but Woolf wanted it too, without doubt.⁸¹ In a characteristic letter, Woolf wrote:

Yes much against my will, L. insisted upon sending an advance copy [of *The Waves*] to the Book Society. But what did Hugh say? Damned it utterly I suppose from your silence on this head. Please tell me. You know how I mind even the workhouse cats view, vain as I am.⁸²

She despises herself for caring what Walpole thinks, though care she does (perhaps as much as Rose Macaulay), but as a member of the Bloomsbury set she knows not to mention it too often.

Woolf's relationship with Hugh Walpole is an interesting illustration of her ability to express contradictory views. She writes very friendly, supportive letters to 'dear old voluble Hugh',⁸³ while writing to others that 'Bloomsbury sees that he is a fake, and now he sees it too'.⁸⁴ Yet, when Harold Nicholson gave a BBC talk labelling Woolf and others from the Bloomsbury group 'modernists', and excluding Galsworthy, Barrie, Priestly and Walpole on the grounds that 'from the scientific standpoint, they are all old-fashioned', Woolf wrote to Walpole,

You're real to some – I to others. Who's to decide what reality is? Not dear old Harold, anyhow, whom I've not heard, but if as you say, he sweeps us into separate schools one hostile to the other, then he's utterly and damnably wrong, and to teach the public that's the way to read us is a crime and a scandal, and accounts for the imbecility which makes all criticism worthless. Lord – how tired I am of being caged with Aldous, Joyce and Lawrence! Can't we exchange cages for a lark? How horrified all the professors would be!⁸⁵

This is a generous Woolf, very different from the Woolf of the 'Middlebrow' letter who seemed absolutely clear that it is the highbrow who is qualified to express reality. Her sustained friendship with Walpole makes this letter more than mere hypocrisy. I think that, even with her impassioned critique of the middlebrow, Woolf had a far wider and more inclusive sense of literary value than we have inherited from 70 years of literary

⁸¹ See Nigel Nicholson's introduction, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Nigel Nicholson, 6 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977), III, p. xv.

⁸² Woolf, Letter to Vita Sackville-West, 10 Sept 1931, *Letters*, IV, p. 377.

⁸³ Woolf, Letter to Ottoline Morrell, 19 Feb 1938, *Letters*, VI, p. 216.

⁸⁴ Woolf, Letter to Vanessa Bell, 12 May 1928, *Letters*, III, p. 499.

⁸⁵ Woolf, Letter to Hugh Walpole, 8 Nov 1931, *Letters*, IV, p. 402. For details of Nicholson's talk of the 29 Sept 1931, see *The Listener*, 30 Sept 1931.

criticism. The categorisation of literature remains a vexed question. In order to understand the novels of Elizabeth von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor I have found it necessary to consider them in the context of their literary culture: I have placed them in the category middlebrow. However, I hope I have not put them in a cage. The categorisation of literature must be used as a dynamic tool that interrogates as well as making connections, and should not be used to ignore and dismiss.

The urge to classify and categorise is as strong as ever in Frank Swinnerton's memoirs *The Georgian Literary Scene 1910-1935* (1935, revised 1969), *Figures in the Foreground: Literary Reminiscences 1917-1940* (1963), *Background with Chorus: A Footnote to Changes in English Literary Fashion Between 1901 and 1917* (1956). However, like Woolf, Swinnerton gives us an intriguingly different view of literary history from that presented by conventional histories of the period. His account of the reception of one of his novels is worth quoting at length:

My short novel *Nocturne*, published in England in 1917 and in America one year later, dealt with the events of a single evening in the lives of five people. It had a poor English press, and I was told not to play tricks again; but the warm praise of H.G. Wells, who, unknown to myself, contributed a preface to the American edition, prompted reviewers in the United States to greater cordiality. [...] Ricochet led to a quiver of interest in England among what William Heinemann used to call 'the little West End clique'. [Secker] then used the Wells preface, and sold the whole edition of a thousand copies at once. A third followed in 1922, [...] and a fourth in 1926.⁸⁶ In 1937 the book was included in the *World's Classics*; it was translated into almost all the European languages; and just before, or during, the second War was published at sixpence in paper covers, when about one hundred thousand were sold. This last event destroyed its reputation. A few innocents continued enthusiastic, and Maugham included the book entire in a massive anthology which he called *Travellers' Library*; but that was practically the end.

You can no longer buy *Nocturne* in the *World's Classics*; I am told that a reference to it in at least one standard work has disappeared, and that no academic literary historian of today dreams of naming such an unimportant work.⁸⁷

This vignette of *Nocturne*'s publishing history gives us an example of how a text's status could change with the vacillations of popularity over this period. The experimental form (a single evening) goes from being regarded unfavourably as

⁸⁶ In *The Modern Novel: Some Aspects of Contemporary Fiction* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1926) Elizabeth Drew could both mention *Nocturne* as a novel so well-known it is not necessary to give the author's name (p. 23), and later describe it as 'Swinnerton's masterpiece' (p. 177).

⁸⁷ Frank Swinnerton, *Figures in the Foreground* (London: Hutchinson, 1963), p. 47-8.

'playing tricks', to critical success, to establishment status in the *World's Classics*, to bestseller status and subsequent critical eclipse. To continue to be interested in a book after it has achieved bestseller status is to be 'innocent' and culturally unsophisticated. It sounds very much as though there was a middle period in the life of this novel when its status shifted because of readership and it 'became' middlebrow, as suggested by Nicola Humble.

Swinnerton's keenness for categorisation does not include using the term 'middlebrow'. His chapter titles for *The Georgian Literary Scene* offer the expected and familiar: 'Bloomsbury: Bertrand Russell, Roger Fry and Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf', but also many novelists who could be considered middlebrow and have disappeared from view: 'The Novelists of the Next Generation: Rose Macaulay, Sheila Kaye-Smith, Henry Handel Richardson, Oliver Onions, J.D. Beresford, Compton Mackenzie, Hugh Walpole, Gilbert Canaan, Francis Brett Young, Constance Holme, Mary Webb'. Swinnerton is not a fan of Bloomsbury. With delightful honesty, he remarks 'I write harshly of Bloomsbury from sheer malice'.⁸⁸ Swinnerton takes exception to what he sees as a 'conflict between its performance and its presumption' to 'aristocracy'. 'Like an even later generation of dilettanti, it wanted to impress people into reading what it wrote, whether they liked it or not; that is, it wanted to be read from snobbery'. His dislike, ironically, has much in common with Woolf's dislike of the middlebrow; he finds Bloomsbury to be mixed 'rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige'.⁸⁹

The persistence of the middlebrow: World War II and beyond

The frame of World War II, standing less in the shadow of modernism, has seen women's middlebrow writing better served by academic criticism than the inter-war period. In the late 1990s there was a surge of interest in British women's writing during the war: Jenny Hartley's *Millions Like Us: British Women's Fiction of the Second World War*, Karen Schnieder's *Loving Arms: British Women Writing the Second World War*, and Phyllis Lassner, *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of Their Own*, were all published in 1997. Each utilise middlebrow fiction to support their

⁸⁸ Frank Swinnerton, *The Georgian Literary Scene* (London: Hutchinson, 1969), p. 266.

⁸⁹ Woolf, 'Middlebrow', p. 115

theses on women's 'responses' to war, but are concerned more with identifying social and political themes than an analysis of literary technique. Gill Plain's 1996 *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* differs in that it is primarily a work of literary criticism. She comments that the texts she considers 'might seem superficially to have little in common, crossing as they do the boundaries of 'highbrow' and 'popular' culture - but such divisions are arbitrary and unhelpful in relation to the moment of war'. She hopes to 'continue the process, begun by Alison Light (1991) of breaking down the boundaries between high and low cultures that function only to limit and constrain our analysis of the period'.⁹⁰ This is an important point, yet it appears that, for these critics, it is the 'moment of war' that justifies a consideration of middlebrow texts. I would argue that the 'moment of war' is not the only period to demand a consideration of texts that fall between 'highbrow' and 'popular' culture.

Critical studies of post-war fiction commonly return to reading texts in relation to modernism, typically seeing fiction as in crisis. Brian Shaffer's 2006 study *Reading the Novel in English 1950-2000* argues that 'in the 1950s and early 1960s, the novel tended to reject literary modernist innovations, reacting against the modernist novel's conspicuous complexity'.⁹¹ Andrzej Gasiorek's insightful *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (1995) conceptualises the period rather differently. Whilst acknowledging the literary conflicts of the time, he argues that 'the impulse to represent a changing social world with the greatest possible fidelity remains central to much post-war writing'. His focus is on the novels that 'try to reconceptualize realism rather than to reject it outright in the wake of modernist and postmodernist critique'. Gasiorek concludes that the 'distinctions between "realist" and "experimental" or between "traditional" and "innovative", which were of such significance to the modernists and the avant-garde in the earlier part of the century, are so irrelevant to the post-war period that they should be dropped altogether'.⁹² His framework is a laudable contribution to the breaking down of the cultural boundaries that persist in the post-war period. However, though such a framework sounds highly sympathetic to the type of writers labelled middlebrow, Gasiorek does not include them in his study.

⁹⁰ Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. x.

⁹¹ Brian Shaffer, *Reading the Novel in English 1950-2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 4.

⁹² Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), p. v.

Dominic Head's *Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (2002) argues that 'the post-war novel has done much to discredit a rigid distinction between "high" and "low" culture'. The 'gap between the novel of ideas and the more popular (especially comic) novel has become less, rather than more, distinct in the post-war years, as a natural consequence of the gradual democratization of narrative fiction'. The novel, he continues, is 'the middlebrow art form *par excellence*'.⁹³ His selection of over 100 novels is wide-ranging, with a good balance of male and female writers, although, unfortunately, Elizabeth Taylor does not make it in. As a popular teaching resource, this positive appraisal of middlebrow texts is particularly encouraging. However, it is unfortunate that Head's study lacks an explicit critical framing of the term.

The majority of studies on the twentieth century thus set up discrete periods: the inter-war years, World War II writing, and post-war.⁹⁴ There is, of course, a practical need to define temporal limits to a literary study, but the dominance of these 'periods' has tended to construct rather arbitrary divisions. I agree with Humble's assertion that the feminine middlebrow novel was not immediately disrupted by World War II.⁹⁵ Though the end of the war appears to be a tidy end point, there is not, in fact, a decisive break between the end of the war and the late forties and fifties, just as there is not between the World War I and the interwar years.⁹⁶ I will trace the continuities, demonstrating how Elizabeth von Arnim's comedic form interpreted both the First World War and the interwar years, only stumbling with the Second World War. And while Elizabeth Taylor's comedic voice is unique, her career (beginning in 1945 with the publication of *At Mrs Lippincote's*) does not, unsurprisingly, represent the emergence of a new form for a new period. The continuities of form and theme are clearly visible in her work. Humble argues that significant cultural change came in the mid-1950s, when the

⁹³ Dominic Head, *Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 6

⁹⁴ For example, Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1983), Phyllis Lassner, *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of their Own* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1997), Niamh Baker, *Happily Ever After? Women's Fiction in Postwar Britain 1945-60* (Houndmills, Macmillan Education, 1989), Jane Dowson, ed., *Women's Writing 1945-60: After the Deluge* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995).

⁹⁵ Humble, p. 3.

⁹⁶ Alison Light suggests that using 'interwar' as an interval might makes more sense from a masculine point of view than it does from women's: 'women's history, lived, as it were, in a different place, need not run parallel to that of men, might follow connected but different paths' p. 9. 'Between the wars' for Light, 'is a convenient and workable fiction', p. 18.

fashionable writing became ‘assertively male - that of John Osborne, Kingsley Amis, and John Wain’, and the next generation of women writers – Doris Lessing, Muriel Spark and Margaret Drabble, ‘explored a world of bed-sits and careers, where women’s lives were no longer absolutely constrained by the domestic’.⁹⁷ I will end my thesis with a consideration of how Taylor’s 1961 novel *In a Summer Season* was received at the time of the ‘Angry Young Men’.

Whilst I believe that the mid-1950s represents a more logical demarcation point than the rather arbitrary date of 1945, it is not unproblematic. Shaffer gives Kingsley Amis, Iris Murdoch and Angus Wilson as examples of ‘antimodernist realism’, yet their work could be regarded as following in a non-modernist tradition that had endured throughout the inter-war period.⁹⁸ Kingsley Amis was one of Taylor’s most high-profile supporters, defending her domestic subject matter as ‘true to life as it is lived by large numbers of people’, which he argued, ‘is as valid as any other, and more valid than many, for exploration by the serious novelist’.⁹⁹ Angus Wilson’s most celebrated novel *The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot* (1958) addresses the classic middlebrow theme of the domestic life of an upper-middle-class, middle-aged woman, with an almost obsessive focus on manners and misunderstanding.¹⁰⁰ And indeed Kingsley Amis seems to be criticised for some very middlebrow qualities: John Updike wrote ‘if the post-war British novel figures on the international stage as winsomely trivial, Kingsley Amis must bear part of the blame’.¹⁰¹ Despite Head’s contention that in the post-war period the novel has become a ‘middlebrow art form *par excellence*’, middlebrow remains a pejorative term. John Updike, frequently criticized for his focus on middle-class, suburban domestic life, was called American literature’s ‘perennial apostle to the middlebrows’ by Gore Vidal in 1985. Perhaps a slight lessening in the strength of the insult can be demonstrated by Vidal’s parenthetical comment that ‘this is not meant, entirely, unkindly’.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Humble, p. 4.

⁹⁸ Shaffer, p. 1, 4.

⁹⁹ Kingsley Amis, ‘At Mrs Taylor’s’, *The Spectator*, 14 June 1957, p. 84.

¹⁰⁰ Angus Wilson’s status is puzzling. The content and form of his novels frequently seem classically middlebrow, yet he is critically highly-regarded, appearing frequently in studies of the post-war period (for example, Andrzej Gasiorek’s *Post-War British Fiction*), and is never described as ‘middlebrow’. This may be because of his influential work as a critic. It may also be because he is male.

¹⁰¹ Updike’s review of Amis’s *Jake’s Thing* (1978) in John Updike, ‘Jake and Lolly Opt Out’, in *Hugging the Shore: Essays in Criticism* (New York: Knopf, 1983), p. 300. Quoted by Mary Joannou in her presentation ‘The Internationalisation of Literature by Women Writers in the 1950s’ at ‘Revisiting the Fifties’, a study day at Leeds Metropolitan University, 29th November 2008.

¹⁰² In this 1985 essay Vidal finds it necessary to add an explanatory footnote: ‘Although the three estates, high-, middle-, and lowbrow, are as dead as Dwight Macdonald, their most vigorous deployer, something about today’s literary scene, combined with Calvino’s death, impels me to resurrect the terms.’ Gore

Lyndsey Stonebridge and Marina MacKay's *British Fiction After Modernism* (2007) offers a valuable attempt to break out of the usual historical parameters by focussing on the late 1930s to the late 1960s, but again this is a period constructed in relation to modernism: 'just after modernism' to 'just before post-modernism' is conceptualised as a period in which 'mid-century writing reacted to [modernism's] influence by adapting some of its elements to new political and fictional ends'.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, Stonebridge and MacKay aim to 'get beyond the formalist distinction between experimental and realist fiction that has dominated accounts of this period and which has also, and not always merely incidentally, stamped many mid-century writers as irretrievably and disastrously minor'.¹⁰⁴ They can thus include essays on understudied writers, including N. H. Reeve's on childhood and writing in the 1940s, which considers Elizabeth Taylor alongside A. L. Barker, William Sansom and Arthur Gwynn-Browne.

In *No, Not Bloomsbury* (1987), Malcolm Bradbury argued that 'the progress of the novel has always depended on an oscillation between two parts of its nature, its referential and discursive and its aesthetic function'.¹⁰⁵ As MacKay and Stonebridge note, despite Bradbury's title, by making this polar distinction he reminds us of Virginia Woolf's famous attack on the realist Edwardian novelist:

The terms on which mid-century fiction has been (and often still is) read were often established by those modernist writers who, in their iconoclastic polemics about the function of fiction, attacked their immediate predecessors for having 'referential and discursive' ambitions of a kind that made the highest artistic achievements impossible; 'realist' became synonymous with crudity and anachronism.¹⁰⁶

Despite drawing these parallels, Mackay and Stonebridge do not advocate the abandonment of these distinctions, as Gasiorek does. While objecting to Bradbury's attempt to rehabilitate post-war fiction from its 'dire' reputation by finding it to be incipiently postmodern, they argue that 'many of these writers are so indebted to

Vidal, 'Calvino's death', *The Essential Gore Vidal* (Random House, 2000) <<http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/1000/vidal/essay.html>>, no page numbers, [accessed 9 May 2009].

¹⁰³ Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge, eds, *British Fiction After Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 2.

¹⁰⁴ MacKay and Stonebridge, p. 3.

¹⁰⁵ Malcolm Bradbury, *No, Not Bloomsbury* (London: André Deutsch, 1987), p. 187, quoted in MacKay and Stonebridge, p. 3.

¹⁰⁶ MacKay and Stonebridge, p. 3.

modernism that they need to be read in relation to it'. Rather than the polar distinction envisioned by Bradbury and Woolf, MacKay and Stonebridge argue that modernism was always more 'overtly social and historical' than critical orthodoxy would have it, and that conversely, post-war fiction is more aesthetically innovative than has been acknowledged.¹⁰⁷

MacKay and Stonebridge, while making an important contribution to the criticism of under-read and under-studied texts, try to have it both ways in terms of their theoretical position. While discussing the limitations of the modernist movement for an understanding of these texts, they persist in reading them in relation to modernism. They themselves comment that the literary reputations of the novelists have been stunted by the fact that they do not fit into a 'movement'. Given the 'critical and historical awkwardness' of these writers' careers, they argue 'it might be foolish to say we need to recontextualize mid-century writers in order to understand them better - to some extent those contexts never really seemed there for many of the writers discussed'. They find that many writers seemed peculiarly 'out of their immediate culture', positioning themselves as outsiders. What unites many of them is 'grim humour'.¹⁰⁸ Thus Elizabeth Taylor finds a place, as an ironist and humourist; yet while these techniques bring a sense of critical detachment, I argue that it is by writing very much from within her culture that she is able to bring such a ruthless understanding to her milieu.

Jane Dowson argues that an examination of women's writing helps to revise residual myths that 'the 1940s spawned a homogeneously egalitarian culture which evolved into a classless Britain in the 1950s, that feminism was an anachronism and that literature was exhausted'.¹⁰⁹ It is an important point. The notion, recounted by MacKay and Stonebridge, that the post-war consensus left little for writers to push against, is challenged by reading women's writing. Certainly women had plenty to push against: from being hailed as heroes for their work in industry and agriculture during the war, they were now expected to relinquish this freedom and return to the home. As Dowson notes, 'many women writers were alienated from the patriotic feminine ideal

¹⁰⁷ MacKay and Stonebridge, p. 3, 5.

¹⁰⁸ MacKay and Stonebridge, p. 9.

¹⁰⁹ Jane Dowson (ed), *Women's Writing, 1945-1960: After the Deluge* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 1.

sentimentalised by popular ideology'.¹¹⁰ Dowson's study continues the work begun by Niamh Baker in her 1989 study, *Happily Ever After? Women's Fiction in Postwar Britain 1945-60* (a study unacknowledged by Dowson):

The myth that women were universally happy in the role ascribed to them in the postwar period, that they passively accepted, or were deceived into accepting, this narrow view of their potential, is still held as a truth about the 1950s.¹¹¹

Dowson and Baker find that the notions of both societal consensus and literary exhaustion are inaccurate. Baker argues that 'in fact, the more closely one looks at the postwar period, the more deceptive its bland surface appears'.¹¹² The idea that it was disastrous for a productive literary tension in that 'mid-century writers became more domestic and domesticated',¹¹³ I would argue is indicative of the sexist paradigm that denigrates the domestic, rather than demonstrating that fiction was indeed in a bad way. Similarly to Baker, Dowson argues that 'many authors appropriated, developed or subverted the formulaic conventions of popular fantasies while pressing upon the boundaries of traditional "realist" representations'.¹¹⁴

Baker's rationale for selecting the novelists in her study reads like a definition of middlebrow, and is very similar to that of Nicola Humble:

I have concentrated on women writers who fall into that imprecise area between "literature" and "popular" fiction, sitting uneasily on the borderlines. I have chosen to look specifically at novelists who write mainly about women, and from the woman's point of view. [...] Others I have included are regarded by some as literature and by others as popular, and the difficulty in placing these writers makes them particularly interesting. [...] Most of the writers are from what can loosely be called the middle class.¹¹⁵

Although Baker does not specifically use the term 'middlebrow', this is a clear continuation of this category of fiction. She examines novels by Barbara Comyns, Elizabeth Goudge, Elizabeth Jane Howard, Nancy Mitford, Barbara Pym, and pays particularly close attention to Elizabeth Taylor; quotations from her novels feature as

¹¹⁰ Dowson, p. 3.

¹¹¹ Niamh Baker, *Happily Ever After? Women's Fiction in Postwar Britain 1945-60* (Houndmills, Macmillan Education, 1989), p. 3.

¹¹² Baker, p. 5.

¹¹³ MacKay and Stonebridge, p. 1.

¹¹⁴ Dowson, p. 7.

¹¹⁵ Baker, p. 23. Nicola Humble, like Jane Dowson, does not make any mention of Niamh Baker's 1989 study, a surprising omission given the relevance of her pioneering work.

epigraphs to begin several chapters. Baker argues, as I do, for a continuity of form in women's fiction:

Women writers now had a tradition behind them of their foremothers who had found ways of expressing subversive ideas and of depicting a true reality, either consciously or semi-consciously, while appearing to write with circumspection and decorum.¹¹⁶

I argue that one of these ways of expressing subversive ideas, while appearing to write with circumspection and decorum, is through comedy.

The importance of form: comedy

In my study of Elizabeth von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor's novels I will consider their style and technique, elements which have been understudied in the existing critical literature on the feminine middlebrow novel, with the admirable exception of Light. Tory Young observes that Humble's work is 'a cultural rather than a literary study: it is the subject matter, not the style of the novels, which demarcates its temporal boundaries', a comment that is also true of Beauman; similarly the studies of women's writing in World War II are primarily concerned with social history.¹¹⁷ Intriguingly, Young's analysis is that 'the revival of interest in the feminine middlebrow novel is not only a continuation of feminist revisionism but seems to mask an anxiety about the contemporary preoccupation with literary form'.¹¹⁸ This anxiety appears to be lessening: Humble returned to the middlebrow with her 2008 article 'The Queer Pleasures of Reading: Camp and the Middlebrow', which suggests that middlebrow novels, and the reading culture surrounding them, have an inherently camp sensibility. Camp, she argues, is a mode of aestheticism; these are novels that emphasise the importance of style over content.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Baker, p. 21.

¹¹⁷ Studies which focus on 'war-time' writing predominantly read fiction to examine cultural changes, for example Phyllis Lassner *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of Their Own* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1997).

¹¹⁸ Young, p. 188-89.

¹¹⁹ Nicola Humble 'The Queer Pleasures of Reading: Camp and the Middlebrow', *Working Papers on the Web*, 11 (July 2008) <<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/middlebrow/index.html>> [accessed 9 September 2010], no page numbers.

It is form that seems to be crucial to an understanding of both the achievements of these novelists, and their reception. If, as Humble contended in her 2001 book, middlebrow literature does not differ significantly from the conventions of the mainstream 19th century novel, it is particularly strange that the criticism that informs our understanding of the 19th century novel does not inform our understanding of the middlebrow. In their domestic focus, use of romance narratives and the comedy of manners, Von Arnim and Taylor, I would argue, are inheritors of Jane Austen's much-studied legacy. D. W. Harding's influential 1940 article 'Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen' offers a way we might understand both the misreading of these novelists and how they develop the generic conventions of the 19th century to deliver serious and complex critiques of their societies. Harding observes, as one might of these novelists, that the general impression one receives of Austen is that she expressed the 'gentler virtues of a civilized social order' and revealed the 'comic foibles and amiable weaknesses of the people whom she lived amongst and liked'.¹²⁰

Harding argues that it is easy to misread Austen, for she intended it to be so: 'her books are, as she meant them to be, read and enjoyed by precisely the sort of people whom she disliked'.¹²¹ She combines two kinds of satire – ordinary satire against her characters, which invites the reading public to feel comfortably superior, but then also the stabs of satire against her society, that are smaller and easier to ignore. He offers the example of Austen's description of Miss Bates in *Emma*. Miss Bates 'enjoyed a most uncommon degree of popularity for a woman neither young, handsome, rich, nor married'. So far, so conventional in its wit. However, Austen continues 'and she had no intellectual superiority to make atonement for herself, or frighten those who might hate her, into outward respect'.¹²² To Harding this sharp stab is an 'eruption of fear and hatred into the relationships of everyday life'.¹²³

This analysis of Austen as a writer with 'an edge', someone who within the genre of a domestic romance offers a sharp and incisive critique of her society, has now passed into orthodoxy. Elizabeth von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor were both compared to Jane

¹²⁰ D. W. Harding, 'Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen' in *Regulated Hatred and Other Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. by Monica Lawlor (London: Athlone Press, 1998), p. 5, 6.

¹²¹ Harding, p. 6.

¹²² Jane Austen, *Emma* (1815; London: Penguin Classics, 1996), p. 22.

¹²³ Harding, p. 10.

Austen; it seems to have become conventional and lazy praise for the witty woman novelist. One of the few articles about Elizabeth Taylor, for example, begins:

She was increasingly referred to with respect, invariably compared to Jane Austen (“the modern man’s Jane Austen,” said Arthur Mizener), and – certainly in this country – never taken very seriously.¹²⁴

Increasingly respected, compared to Austen, but paradoxically, never taken very seriously; it seems that the critical understanding of Austen, developed by Harding and others, is not transferable. Austen stands alone as the female representative of sophisticated wit, as Woolf stands as the representative of women writers between the wars. These middlebrow novelists are compared to Austen for their narrow domestic focus, the use of romantic structures and motifs, and the incisive comedy of manners: the same reasons that in the context of the twentieth century they are dismissed. In fact, it appears that the reputation of these novelists, if they are considered, has something in common with the cosy, comfortable opinion of Austen before her reassessment in the 1920s. It is ironic that this reassessment of Austen began with Virginia Woolf’s article of 1922, in the very same period that the term ‘middlebrow’ with all its pejorative connotations developed.¹²⁵ Yet I argue that the key line of development traceable from Austen to von Arnim and Taylor is in Harding’s analysis of the ‘eruption of fear and hatred into the relationships of everyday life’.

Far from dealing ‘in soothing and not disturbing sentiments’, as Q. D. Leavis posits,¹²⁶ these novelists seek to demonstrate the devastating cruelty and disappointment of middle-class life, especially for women. This is not to attempt to move them out of the category of middlebrow. It is those elements that have given them the label – domestic setting, concern with courtship and marriage, the ‘lucid’ prose and wit - they have so skilfully used to create complex and challenging novels.¹²⁷ As Faye Hammill observes, ‘much middlebrow writing has been ignored by the academy because of a misconception that it is so straightforward as to require no analysis, while in fact, its

¹²⁴ William Pritchard, ‘Reconsideration: Elizabeth Taylor – Almost Austen’ *New Republic*, 26 March 1984, p. 36.

¹²⁵ Virginia Woolf, ‘Jane Austen Practising’, in *Women and Writing* (London: The Women’s Press, 1979), pp. 104-8

¹²⁶ Q. D. Leavis, p. 37.

¹²⁷ An earlier version of this analysis of the significance of D. W. Harding’s work appeared in my Master’s dissertation: ‘The Reassurance of Cruelty: The Novels of Jane Austen, Elizabeth von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor’ (unpublished master’s dissertation, Roehampton University, 2004), pp. 1-2.

witty, polished surfaces frequently conceal unexpected depths and subtleties'.¹²⁸ It is the comedy of manners, developed from the consummate stylist Austen, that allows von Arnim and Taylor to stay in the 'cosy' middle-class drawing room and yet show us the abyss.¹²⁹

Like middlebrow writing, comic writing by women is similarly neglected by the academy. Middlebrow writer J. B. Priestley's *English Humour* (1929; revised 1976) offers an apposite example of the conventionally-held view of women's comedy. First written in 1929, the book was revised and reissued in 1976 when Priestley was in his eighties. The 'great humorist', Priestley contends, must have three elements: irony, affection, and some contact with reality. Comedy is a serious matter: P. G. Wodehouse, for example, is not a great humorist because 'he does not begin to make us think about life or feel deeply about it'.¹³⁰

In the 1976 edition Priestley has a chapter 'Feminine Humour' to do justice to the humour of women.

[Women] when not in the grip of strong emotions have sharper minds, quick to notice pretensions, dubious motives, and all manner of social absurdities. They live closer to life, the actual living tissue of it, than we men do, half lost as we are in doubtful abstractions and vanity, so often lacking in self knowledge.¹³¹

Unsurprisingly, a male readership is assumed, and women defined as 'other'. However, in Priestley's terms, if his comments are true, then women (when not overcome by 'strong emotions') are more likely to be 'great humorists' than men. Yet Priestley argues that although female humour uses irony and is in close contact with reality, it lacks affection. Feminine humour is not indulgent (he conflates this with 'affection'); 'while relishing absurdity, it also points an accusing finger'.¹³² In this analysis Priestley comes very close to the case for women's distinctive humour made by feminist scholars

¹²⁸ Hammill, p. 6.

¹²⁹ There are many female middlebrow writers who also show us cruelties and disappointments of life for women without comedy, for example Winifred Holtby's *The Crowded Street* (1924), F. M. Mayor's *The Rector's Daughter* (1924), Noel Streatfeild's *Saplings* (1945). Hilary Hinds' article 'Ordinary Disappointments: Femininity, Domesticity, and Nation in British Middlebrow Fiction, 1920-1944', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 55 (2009) considers the relationship between femininity and disappointment, analysing E. M. Delafield's *The Way Things Are* (1927), E. Arnot Robertson's *Ordinary Families* (1933) and Mary Renault's *The Friendly Young Ladies* (1944) without reference to comedy.

¹³⁰ J. B. Priestley, *English Humour* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1976), p. 108.

¹³¹ Priestley, p. 115.

¹³² Priestley, p. 116.

Regina Barreca and Emily Toth. Barreca argues that women do not tend to laugh at those lower in the social hierarchy: 'we are not usually tickled by the bad luck of the fool or by the embarrassment of the underling', but at those above them, in authority.¹³³ Toth claims 'women humorists attack – or subvert – the deliberate choices people make: hypocrisies, affectations, mindless following of social expectations'.¹³⁴

Despite criticising female humour for its 'accusing finger' Priestley still sees women's comedy as gentle and reconciling. In the 1976 edition his concluding remarks clearly demonstrate his discomfort with the changing position of women and his belief in an essential femininity. 'Younger women novelists appear to be too intense to aim at laughter. (Moreover, a fairly settled society is more favourable to humour)' while the world 'cries out for Woman to assert her instinctive feeling for unity and harmony'.¹³⁵ It is interestingly contradictory: Priestley believes women to be naturally reconciling, so persists in seeing their humour to be so, despite the evidence to the contrary that he himself has used to exclude women from the 'great humorists'. For Priestley, if it is to be funny, humour cannot point an accusing finger.

Priestley states the group to which he belongs, 'we men', and recognises that women's humour differs from men's, yet seems unaware of the social contingency of his response in his need to definitively categorise the 'great humorists'. He demonstrates Barreca's argument: 'comedy, out of all the textual territories explored, is the least universal. Almost every detail of our lives affects the way we create and respond to humour'.¹³⁶ Priestley's little asides like 'women join in the laughs because women are great joiners-in, especially if taken out for the evening',¹³⁷ are easy to mock, but they show Priestley's unexamined acknowledgment that men's humour is not universal. Women 'join-in' with the dominant discourse, from their subordinate position whence they are 'taken out'. On a night out with Priestley, women do not make their own jokes.

Regina Barreca begins her 1988 study of women and humour by observing that the major studies of the role of comedy in British literature do not deal with women

¹³³ Regina Barreca, *Untamed and Unabashed: Essays on Women and Humour in British Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), p. 12.

¹³⁴ Emily Toth, 'Female Wits', *Massachusetts Review*, 22 (Winter 1981), 783-93 (p. 783).

¹³⁵ Priestley, p. 138.

¹³⁶ Barreca, p. 12.

¹³⁷ Priestley, p. 128.

writers.¹³⁸ Twenty years later, this remains the case.¹³⁹ Feminist studies of comedy also remain few and far between; there was a burst of activity in the late 80s and early 90s that appears to have come to a curiously abrupt end.¹⁴⁰ Barreca's excellent essay collections of 1988, 1992 and 1994 failed to generate further momentum in this area. In 1988 she suggested that 'feminist criticism has generally avoided the discussion of comedy, perhaps in order to be accepted by conservative critics who found feminist theory comic in and of itself'.¹⁴¹ I would argue that feminist criticism is now accepted in academia, yet the neglect of women's comedy shows a certain lack of confidence. Still concerned to establish feminist criticism as serious and rigorous, comedy is avoided as frivolous. As discussed above, Nicola Humble notes that the accepted critical understanding of the 1920s to the 1950s leaves little space for the women writers the majority of people read: Rosamond Lehmann, Rose Macaulay, Elizabeth Taylor, and none at all for the writers Humble terms 'frivolous': Stella Gibbons, Dodie Smith and Nancy Mitford.¹⁴² Elizabeth von Arnim, acknowledged as a great wit, can also be added to this list of the 'frivolous'. The comedic middlebrow novelist is thus damned twice over. Despite very frequent reference to comedic middlebrow texts, Humble's important study does not specifically address or theorise this use of comedy. Barreca's observation of 1988 remains largely true: '[feminist criticism] has as yet left unexamined the crucial roles of comedy paired with anger as shaping forces and feminist tools. Why this silence on a matter which is a characteristic manifestation of women's writing?'¹⁴³

Barreca quotes from a sociological study from the 1970s which concluded, 'it seems reasonable to propose that attempting a witty remark is often an intrusive, disturbing

¹³⁸ Regina Barreca, ed., *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (London: Gordon and Breach, 1988).

¹³⁹ As with many fields of literary criticism, the vast majority of writers studied in analyses of comedy are men: Aristotle, Shakespeare, Laurence Sterne and Oscar Wilde. A chapter on comedy and gender will now be included to address possible differences and some women's writing, but this approach of course perpetuates the construction of women's humour as 'other'; a minority aside. See for example Andrew Stott's in many ways excellent *Comedy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), Jerry Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously* (London: Routledge, 1994), and James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004) in which only one essay out of 22 is on a woman writer. A positive exception is Glen Cavaliero's *The Alchemy of Laughter* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), in which the work of several women writers, including Elizabeth von Arnim, form an integral part of his discussion.

¹⁴⁰ Along with Barreca's work, see for example June Sochen, ed., *Women's Comic Visions* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), Gail Finney, ed., *Look Who's Laughing: Gender and Comedy* (Reading: Gordon and Breach, 1994), Judy Little, *Comedy and the Women Writer: Woolf, Spark and Feminism* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

¹⁴¹ Barreca, *Last Laughs*, p. 5.

¹⁴² Humble, p. 2.

¹⁴³ Barreca, *Last Laughs*, p. 5.

and aggressive act, and within this culture, probably unacceptable for a female'.¹⁴⁴

Barreca goes on to argue that 'women are regarded as incapable of producing the very challenging, angry and subversive comedy they in fact write'. With few exceptions like Harding's 'Regulated Hatred', the view is that women who write comedies 'write them only to provide mild entertainment'.¹⁴⁵ (A view that Humble, by describing comic novelists as frivolous, appears to share.) Barreca does not address the contradiction exposed by this analysis. If the use of humour is an 'intrusive, disturbing and aggressive act [...] probably unacceptable for a female' shouldn't women's humour be seen as inherently challenging, rather than only for mild entertainment? How can Priestley keep women's humour within the bounds of conservative femininity if it necessarily entails a breaking free of social restraints? I will argue that the cultural forces that define humour as 'disturbing and aggressive' and thus in conflict with traditional notions of women as naturally reconciling, engender the use of a particular type of comedy by women: the comedy of manners.

Barreca observes that 'the woman writer of comedy is often more careful to appear conciliatory than her male contemporaries, but clearly decorum disguises mutiny. Like a handgun hidden in a handbag, the woman writer often obscures her most dangerous implements by making use of her most feminine attributes'.¹⁴⁶ It is the comedy of manners which allows women to do this: to express humour while appearing to stay within acceptable constructions of femininity. The limited feminist analysis has struggled to address the construction and function of this type of comedy. Like the study of the middlebrow, the feminist study of comedy has focussed on subject and narrative structure, and has neglected comedic technique.

Barreca argues that much of women's comedy can only be viewed if one is prepared to deal with the 'covert narrative strategies' employed. In Harding's analysis of Austen he argues that she finds it necessary to offer alternative readings and to hide her most barbed criticisms because she values her society and feels the need for their good will.¹⁴⁷ I argue that for these middlebrow novelists the comedy of manners *is* their

¹⁴⁴ McGhee, Paul, 'The Role of Laughter and Humor in Growing Up Female', in *Becoming Female: Perspectives on Development*, ed. by Claire B Kopp (New York, Pelnum Press, 1979), p. 225, quoted in Barreca, *Last Laughs*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁴⁵ Barreca, *Last Laughs*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁶ Barreca, *Untamed and Unabashed*, p. 21.

¹⁴⁷ Harding, p. 11.

narrative strategy for expressing their disappointment and anger at the cruelty of life, a strategy that is covert in the sense that understandings of comedy and irony are contingent on the position of the reader. As Barreca has argued 'comedy, out of all the textual territories explored, is the least universal. Almost every detail of our lives affects the way we create and respond to humour'.¹⁴⁸ The feminine middlebrow comedy, therefore, speaks differently to different readers. Like Austen, the novels of von Arnim can be happily read by some as jolly inconsequential romps, while to others they speak of 'eruptions of fear and hatred into the relationships of everyday life'.

The idea that middlebrow novels 'spoke' very specifically to a middle-class, most frequently female, audience is central to Humble's analysis. The relationship of the reader to the feminine middlebrow text, she argues, is one of the keys to understanding this highly reflexive form. Indeed, in her discussion of the references to 'classic' and highbrow texts within middlebrow novels, Humble argues that these references define the reader. There is the assumption that the reader will pick up the references, and 'such knowledge and interest in fact *defines* a certain sort of woman: middle-class, intellectually curious, intimately engaged with her reading'.¹⁴⁹ The novel therefore defines its own community of readers. Clare Hanson, reading Nicola Beauman's definition of 'the woman's novel' (detailed above), also identifies this reflexivity, remarking 'Beauman's comments point to the ways in which the woman's novel constructs its reader as feminine, interpellating her, in Althusser's phrase, calling on her to recognize a shared identity and shared knowledge'.¹⁵⁰ I argue that similarly, the comedic middlebrow novel addresses a female, middle-class reader who will perceive the jokes, the irony and the serious subjects of these techniques and perform the work necessary to find these novels funny, ironic and serious. The comedy of von Arnim and Taylor therefore speaks to the attentive middlebrow reader in ways that appear to elude those critics who would dismiss the novels as limited or trivial.

The use of irony in these texts also builds a community of readers. As Linda Hutcheon notes of irony, the reader or listener is pivotal to make irony exist: 'someone attributes irony; someone makes irony happen'.¹⁵¹ Hutcheon's 'focus is always on how irony

¹⁴⁸ Barreca, *Untamed and Unabashed*, p. 12.

¹⁴⁹ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 178.

¹⁵⁰ Clare Hanson, *Hysterical Fictions: The 'Woman's Novel' in the Twentieth Century* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), p. 2.

¹⁵¹ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: the Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 6.

comes into existence (or does not) for me as an interpreter: your response to the examples is no doubt going to differ'.¹⁵² There is also the possibility that irony operates in relation to the non-ironic: D. C. Muercke suggests that 'a sense of irony depends for its material upon a lack of a sense of irony in others, much as scepticism depends upon credulity'.¹⁵³ If this is the case, it suggests that the ironic middlebrow novel might in fact depend on a non-ironic view of women's domestic lives for its material. There needs to be a 'straight' view in order for there to be something for irony to subvert. Operating in opposition to the 'non-ironic', this suggests a further way that the ironic middlebrow novel appeals to, and defines, a specific community of readers.

Wayne C. Booth posits 'Four Steps of Reconstruction' necessary to make the 'transformations of meaning experienced in reading any passage of stable irony'. First, a literal meaning is rejected; second, alternative interpretations are tried out; third, decisions are made about the author's knowledge or beliefs; fourth, a new meaning is chosen.¹⁵⁴ Booth thinks this four step act 'completes a more astonishing communal achievement than most accounts have recognized. Its complexities are, after all, shared: the whole thing cannot work at all unless both parties to the exchange have confidence that they are moving together in identical patterns'.¹⁵⁵ In his view, the act of irony demonstrates a 'meeting with other minds' that contradicts prevailing arguments about the unknowability of other people.

In support of this, he quotes Edith Wharton, writing on her friendship with Henry James:

The real marriage of true minds is for any two people to possess a sense of humour or irony pitched in exactly the same key, so that their joint glances at any subject cross like inter-arching search-lights. I have had good friends between whom and myself that bond was lacking, but they were never really intimate friends.¹⁵⁶

If we transfer this understanding to novels, we can imagine that the feminine middlebrow reader could feel these novels to be 'intimate friends'.

¹⁵² Hutcheon, p. 4.

¹⁵³ D. C. Muercke, *Irony: The Critical Idiom* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 2.

¹⁵⁴ Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 10-12.

¹⁵⁵ Booth, p. 13.

¹⁵⁶ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (1934; London: 1972), p. 173, quoted in Booth, p. 13.

Janet Giltrow persuasively makes connections between irony and politeness in her essay 'Ironies of Politeness in Anita Brookner's *Hotel du Lac*'.¹⁵⁷ Giltrow asks 'how is it that politeness expressions can drift so effortlessly to irony? Perhaps, and simply, politeness in itself always has ironic possibility. And the novel of manners (so often taking marriage as its concern) naturally cultivates this ironic possibility'.¹⁵⁸ By her suggestion that politeness can 'drift' 'effortlessly' and 'naturally' to irony, Giltrow does not examine the possibility that irony can be strategically deployed, despite persuasively demonstrating the similarly dynamic nature of politeness. Using the example of the narrative voice describing the resort in *Hotel du Lac*, Giltrow argues that this is a presumptuous speaker who knows, for example, that her listener is not familiar with 'the kind of resort that has recently but definitively gone out of fashion'. The listener knows the speaker knows and still collaborates in the pretence, having no means of contradiction – being left only with the ironic awareness that power is at work.¹⁵⁹ This conception of a passive reader, with no means of contradiction, and merely an ironic awareness of the operation of power, strikes me as a misunderstanding of the nature of irony. To find the statement ironic the reader must contribute their own understanding that the writer means something other than what is stated.

Thus comedy and irony are modes of communication that involve power; in exclusion and inclusion, intervention and evasion. Regina Barreca offers a startling example of the non-universality of humour. In Peter Farb's article 'Speaking Seriously About Humour' in the *Massachusetts Review* (1981) he offers this example of the 'Spooneristic Conundrum': 'What's the difference between a pygmy village and an all-female track team? The pygmy village is a cunning bunch of runts'. As Barreca comments, 'If this is such a great example, and comedy is universal, how come I'm not laughing?'¹⁶⁰ This 'joke' not only demonstrates the non-universality of humour, but it points to the power relationships expressed in comedy, as in politeness and irony. We may bring the necessary knowledge to 'get' the joke and still find it offensive. Barreca argues that the male writer in this culture is always writing from within the dominant discourse in

¹⁵⁷ Janet Giltrow, 'Ironies of Politeness in Anita Brookner's *Hotel du Lac*' in Kathy Mezei, *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

¹⁵⁸ Giltrow, p. 228.

¹⁵⁹ Giltrow, p. 228.

¹⁶⁰ Regina Barreca, ed., *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (London: Gordon and Breach, 1992), p. 3.

terms of his gender; he has the authority of the insider with the potential to change things. From this perspective Farb's joke can intimidate and dominate.

The dominant, established theories of comedy assume a stable, patriarchal society. The notion that comedy can function as an agent of change is a common thread in many theories, but unlike Barreca's understanding of women's comedy as a 'feminist tool', in traditional comedy it is the individual who is changed in order to conform to a stable society. Henri Bergson's influential essay 'Laughter', originally published as 'Le Rire' in 1900, argues that 'the comic expresses, above all else, a special lack of adaptability to society'.¹⁶¹

[Comedy] begins, in fact, with what might be called *a growing callousness to social life*. Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting in touch with the rest of his fellow-beings. It is the part of laughter to reprove his absentmindedness and wake him out of his dream. [Bergson's italics]¹⁶²

Using the analogy of joining the army, Bergson argues that society 'breaks in' its members through laughter: it functions to humiliate and consequently correct individuals. Laughter is therefore conservative, correcting social mistakes. Priestley shares Bergson's view of comedy as socially corrective, and as I have noted above, suggests that 'a fairly settled society is more favourable to humour'.¹⁶³

Central to Bergson's theory is the idea of 'automatism': 'what is essentially laughable is what is done automatically'.¹⁶⁴ Life should be full of vitality, with a changing personal response; the comic figure is instead a kind of clockwork puppet whose behaviour is a series of repetitions.¹⁶⁵ In his introduction to Bergson's essay Wylie Sypher argues that this idea of automatism is linked to the 19th century Marxist notion that 'the middle class has deprived man of his individuality and made him an appendage to the machine'.¹⁶⁶ Andrew Stott, however, notes that 'automatism, or the channelling of diverse thoughts and feelings through one overriding principle, has been the impetus

¹⁶¹ Henri Bergson, 'Laughter', in *Comedy*, ed. by Wylie Sypher (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), p. 146.

¹⁶² Bergson, p. 147.

¹⁶³ Priestley, p. 138.

¹⁶⁴ Bergson, p. 155.

¹⁶⁵ Sypher, *Comedy*, p. xi.

¹⁶⁶ Sypher, p. x.

behind comic characterization since the New Comedy of the third century BC, and provides us with the set of comic stereotypes that have provided the blueprint for comic characterization from the renaissance to the present'.¹⁶⁷ This New Comedy, deriving from the work of Menander, the Greek dramatist, is socially conservative. In a typical plot a young man will fall for a woman who is not eligible to be his wife because she is a slave, or a prostitute, but after some plot twists it will turn out that she is a citizen after all and they can safely marry. With 'this device, the conflicting claims of private passion and social responsibility are neatly reconciled, for the waywardness of desire proves illusory. The impulse that aspires to the forbidden is domesticated, gratified without danger to public convention, and thus the threat to the city-state ideal of a closed conjugal group is averted'.¹⁶⁸

This structural conservatism might deter women writers from using the comic genre. As Susan Carlson notes 'Women are allowed their brilliance, freedom, and power in comedy only because the genre has built-in safeguards against such behavior' – the conventional comic ending of marriage.¹⁶⁹ Taylor's and von Arnim's novels do not usually end in marriage, and with this and other threats to social order they are thus not comedies in this traditional sense. Stott makes a distinction between 'comedy' as structure and genre, and 'humour' a tone 'operating free from generic restraints'.¹⁷⁰ We could therefore use the term 'humour', to describe their funniness, as Eileen Gillooly does in her study of 19th-century British fiction.¹⁷¹ Concerned primarily with 19th century women writers (Austen, Gaskell and Eliot), Gillooly argues that their humour occurs 'as an assortment of barely perceptible punctures in the narration', and as such does not fit into existing masculine categories of 'comedy'.¹⁷² However, I do not think Taylor and von Arnim operate entirely outside the genre of comedy. Instead, rather than being restrained by comedy they play with generic expectations – particularly those of the romantic comedy – and utilise the form to their own subversive ends. The comedy in Taylor's novels is less often recognised than that in von Arnim's, perhaps because

¹⁶⁷ Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 42.

¹⁶⁸ David Konstan, *Roman Comedy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 24-25.

Quoted in Stott, p. 43.

¹⁶⁹ Susan Carlson, *Women and Comedy: Rewriting the British Theatrical Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 17. Quoted in Gail Finney, 'Unity in Difference?' in *Look Who's Laughing: Gender and Comedy* ed. by Gail Finney (Reading: Gordon and Breach, 1994).

¹⁷⁰ Stott, p. 2.

¹⁷¹ Eileen Gillooly, *Smile of Discontent: Humor, Gender and Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p.xx.

¹⁷² Gillooly, p. xix.

they moved further away from the traditional comic genre. However, Stott opens out the term 'comedy', arguing that we should think of it multilaterally, 'at once a literary tradition with identifiable structural qualities, and as a way of describing isolated events or passages within other types of work'.¹⁷³

Sigmund Freud's theories of jokes and humour

The difficulties in defining the terms 'wit', 'comedy' and 'humour', and drawing boundaries between them, is demonstrated by the contortions of the translator of Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. In German the title is 'Der Witz', but as the editor, Angela Richards, notes in 'English usage "wit" and "witty" have a highly restricted meaning and are applied only to the most refined and intellectual kind of jokes'. Freud uses 'witz' and 'witzig' with a far wider meaning than this, however. The alternative, to translate 'witz' as "joke" on the other hand seems itself too wide and to cover the German "Scherz" as well'.¹⁷⁴ While Freud's analysis focuses on the psychological meaning of jokes - and thus, one might infer, their transnational applicability - the difficulties of the translator inadvertently demonstrate the cultural specificity of these terms. The editor's comments (written in 1960, and not considered to require amending for the 1976 edition) also draw attention to changes in usage over time. The English word 'humour' is used in place of the German 'Humour' but Richards cautions that this may sound 'decidedly unnatural to English ears in some of its contexts. The fact is that the word seems to be rarely used by itself to-day: it hardly occurs except in the phrase "sense of humour"'.¹⁷⁵

Freud's analysis of jokes comes to different conclusions from the traditional, conservative account of comedy. The most significant form of joke, to Freud, is the 'tendentious' or 'hostile' joke. He argues that, like our sexual urges, our hostile urges against others have been subject to repression, and because of this it has been necessary to develop a new technique to express hostility: the joke. 'By making our enemy small,

¹⁷³ Stott, pp. 2-3.

¹⁷⁴ Angela Richards, 'Editor's Introduction', in Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. by James Strachey, ed. by Angela Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin: 1976), p. 35. First published as *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* in 1905. First English translation by A. A. Brill under the title *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious* in 1916.

¹⁷⁵ Richards, p. 36.

inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him - to which the third person, who has made no efforts, bears witness by his laughter.' Freud continues 'tendentious jokes are especially favoured in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority'.¹⁷⁶ This analysis might suggest the joke is the most suitable technique for women to criticise men ('persons in exalted positions') in a patriarchal society (where men 'exercise authority'). While also expressing hostility to another, this is very different from Bergson's account of laughter as corrective. Freud in fact, has little interest in the affect of the joke on the subject, or on the wider society; his focus is on the joker and on the 'third person' – the one who laughs.

This is not to say that Freud does not consider the purpose of jokes to be important. He repeatedly, albeit tentatively, suggests the significance of the thoughts that go into jokes. While the substance of the joke is independent of the joke itself, he muses 'just as watch-makers usually provide a particularly good movement with a similarly valuable case, so it may happen with jokes that the best achievements in the way of jokes are used as an envelope for thoughts of the greatest substance'. The joke therefore functions as a kind of façade 'in the contemplation of which one person is satiated while another may try to peer behind it. A suspicion may arise, moreover, that this façade is intended to dazzle the examining eye and that these [comic] stories have therefore something to conceal'.¹⁷⁷ The façade conceals the fact that the joke has something forbidden to say: the truth. The notion of comedy as a vehicle for expressing the truth is not new. In *The Praise of Folly* (1511 and 1515) Erasmus wrote:

The fact is, kings do dislike the truth, but the outcome of this is extraordinary for my fools. They can speak truth and even open insults and be heard with positive pleasure; indeed, the words which would cost a wise man his life are surprisingly enjoyable when uttered by a clown. For truth has a genuine power to please if it manages not to give offence, but this is something the gods have granted only to fools.¹⁷⁸

However, Freud separates the medium from the message: the joke is only the façade. 'As so often', he writes, 'a jest betrays something serious.' Freud gives those jokes that

¹⁷⁶ Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (Harmondsworth: Penguin: 1976), p. 147.

¹⁷⁷ Freud, p. 135, 150.

¹⁷⁸ Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, trans, Betty Radice, rev. A.T.H. Levi (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1993). Quoted in Stott, p. 49.

attack institutions (corresponding to traditional ideas of social satire) a separate category: 'cynical jokes'. Ironically, given its integral place as the ending of a generic comedy, he identifies marriage as the most common target. This is because 'there is no more personal claim than that for sexual freedom and at no point has civilization tried to exercise severer suppression than in the sphere of sexuality'.¹⁷⁹ Once again, Freud's focus is not social significance, but the individual psyche. Yet his analysis speaks to the woman novelists' obsessive examination of marriage, conceptualised by later feminists in the phrase 'the personal is political'.

Freud argues that while hostile jokes give pleasure where the 'satisfaction of the purpose is opposed by an external obstacle which is evaded by the joke', this is not where the big laughs are to be found.¹⁸⁰ The real pleasure of jokes is in the operation of the unconscious. Jokes are an attempt to recreate the childhood pleasure in play that has been brought to an end by an adult 'critical faculty or reasonableness'.¹⁸¹ In tendentious jokes 'an impulse or urge is present which seeks to release pleasure from a particular source and, if it were allowed free play, would release it. Besides this, another urge is present which works against this generation of pleasure - inhibits it, that is, or suppresses it.'¹⁸² Usually repression will operate to control behaviour, but when there is the possibility of making a joke 'the suppressed purpose can, with the assistance of the pleasure from the joke, gain sufficient strength to overcome the inhibition'. Crucially for Freud, 'the enjoyment obtained is not only that produced by the joke: it is incomparably greater', because the 'psychical expenditure' for maintaining inhibition has been saved.¹⁸³ Therefore, the '*yield of pleasure corresponds to the psychical expenditure that is saved*' [Freud's italics].¹⁸⁴

As Jerry Palmer notes, 'Freud makes assertions that pull in conflicting directions'.¹⁸⁵ In his chapter 'The Purposes of Jokes' Freud argues that the best jokes are those which have the most substantial thought in them, but then goes on to argue that what distinguishes jokes is their relation to the unconscious; the joke pleasure is in the recreation of play and the subversion of adult rational thought. Despite this focus on the

¹⁷⁹ Freud, p. 152, 155-6.

¹⁸⁰ Freud, p. 165.

¹⁸¹ Freud, p. 178.

¹⁸² Freud, p. 186.

¹⁸³ Freud, p. 187.

¹⁸⁴ Freud, p. 167.

¹⁸⁵ Jerry Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 82.

individual psyche, Freud argues that jokes need an audience: a third person 'to collaborate in the completion of the process of making the joke'. And in the case of the tendentious joke, it must be the right person - a receptive person who is not opposed to the purpose of the joke.¹⁸⁶ But further than not simply making an attacking joke about, for example, the listener's mother, 'it is essential that he should be in sufficient psychical accord with the first person to possess the same internal inhibitions, which the joke-work has overcome in the latter'.¹⁸⁷ As Barreca has observed, it is not enough to share the knowledge to understand the joke; to laugh one must share much more - what Freud terms 'psychical accord'. 'Every joke calls for a public of its own and laughing at the same jokes is evidence of far-reaching psychical conformity.'¹⁸⁸ Freud's theory of joke-work therefore offers another way of understanding how the novels of Taylor and von Arnim build a community of readers, and how, for those readers without 'psychical accord', they can lack much of their potential meaning.

A problematic aspect of comedy for feminist scholars has been the theory that jokes 'discharge' or 'defuse' the feeling behind the comedy. Judith Wilt argues that comedy has a 'deeply conservative ability to absorb and defuse emotions that threaten fertility and community'. To actually do something about this life, Wilt maintains, we must reject comedy.¹⁸⁹ Freud also sees jokes as functioning to 'discharge', but significantly it is not the ideas behind the joke that are discharged; it is the repression surrounding them. For the listener 'the words of the joke [...] bring about in him the idea or train of thought to the construction of which great internal inhibitions were opposed in him too. [...] the cathectic energy used for the inhibition has now suddenly become superfluous and has been lifted, and is therefore now ready to be discharged by laughter'.¹⁹⁰ Again, despite Freud's lack of interest in the social implications of jokes, this analysis suggests the radical potential of comedy.

To Freud jokes, the 'comic', and humour are all different and distinct in their psychic operation.¹⁹¹ If a situation is genuinely painful, then, he argues, it cannot be comic. In

¹⁸⁶ Freud, p. 197.

¹⁸⁷ Freud, p. 203.

¹⁸⁸ Freud, p. 203-4.

¹⁸⁹ Judith Wilt 'The Laughter of Maidens', in Regina Barreca, ed. *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (London: Gordon and Breach, 1988), p. 176-7.

¹⁹⁰ Freud, p. 201.

¹⁹¹ Freud's distinct theories on jokes, the comic and humour are frequently conflated, perhaps because the distinction is unconvincing. Lisa Colletta, for example, melds her discussion of Freud's theory of jokes

these cases humour is possible: 'humour is a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that interfere with it; it acts as a substitute for the generation of these affects. It puts itself in their place'.¹⁹² Freud argues that like jokes, the pleasure of humour arises from psychic economy; in this case 'from an economy in the expenditure of an affect': the emotional response to the painful situation is not used.¹⁹³ The implications of this theory could be that humour operates to 'defuse emotions' as Wilt fears. However, when Freud returned to the question of humour twenty years after the publication of *Jokes*, he connected humour with his theories about the ego. 'Like jokes and the comic,' he notes, 'humour has something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation, which is lacking in the other two'. This grandeur is in 'the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability'. The ego refuses to be compelled to suffer. The traumas of the external world 'are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure'.¹⁹⁴ Thus humour does, in a sense, defuse emotion, but it does not disarm. 'Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstances.'¹⁹⁵

I think the operation of comedy in the novels I examine is subtly different from both Wilt and Freud's conceptions. The recognition of sharing a 'psychical accord' is as much a key pleasure in comedy as the lifting of inhibition. Together, through the operation of the joke, the community of readers recognises the thought and experience the pleasure and reassurance that others share the thoughts and feelings. As Wayne C. Booth argued of irony:

Often the predominant emotion when reading stable ironies is that of joining, of finding and communing with kindred spirits. The author I infer behind the false words is my kind of man, because he enjoys playing with irony, because he assumes my capacity for dealing with it, and – most important – because he grants me a kind of wisdom; he assumes that he does not have to spell out the shared and secret truths on which my reconstruction is to be built.¹⁹⁶

with that of humour, and uses the terms interchangeably. See Lisa Colletta, *Dark Humour and Social Satire in the Modern British Novel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

¹⁹² Freud, p. 293.

¹⁹³ Freud, p. 293.

¹⁹⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Humour', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 21 (1927-31), ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961), p. 162.

¹⁹⁵ Freud, 'Humour', p. 163.

¹⁹⁶ Booth, p. 28.

These novels express dissatisfaction with the world as it is: sharing and recognising this dissatisfaction does not defuse it, no matter how pleasurable the method of dissemination. I interpret Freud's theory of the function of the ego in humour as demonstrating how empowering comedy can be for women. Humour does not deny the cruelty of life, quite the opposite; its existence is born out of it. And neither does humour defuse emotion. In their use of comedy these women writers are asserting the power of the self and refusing to be compelled to suffer. Freud is correct that humour is rebellious rather than resigned. To use comedy to address the cruelty of life as Taylor and von Arnim do is a retaliation.

Freud's theory of humour also offers an alternative understanding of pleasure. The notion of pleasure is a particularly vexed issue in both the general study of literature (as mentioned above) and specifically of comedy. Pleasure is consistently read as trivial and defusing, but for Freud, choosing to experience pleasure is a 'victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability'.¹⁹⁷ In all his analyses, whether he categorises the phenomena as 'jokes', 'humour' or 'the comic' they must all make us laugh and experience pleasure. In contrast, the comic literature that receives the vast majority of academic attention is dark humour, political satire or irony, rarely that which is actually funny.¹⁹⁸ Indeed, the *Oxford Diction of Literary Terms* notes 'The adjective *comedic* means 'characteristic of comedy' and is sometimes preferred as more neutral than 'comic' or 'comical' in that it avoids suggesting that the referent is funny'.¹⁹⁹ Eileen Gillooly, for example, chooses canonical novels for her study of 'feminine humour', acknowledging that they 'rarely evok[e] more than a smile or a smirk'.²⁰⁰ Gillooly's study illustrates a tendency to look for uses of comedy in non-comic canonical texts, rather than studying comic texts. Von Arnim and Taylor's novels, in contrast, frequently make the reader who shares 'psychical accord' laugh out loud. Their mastery of comedy allows them to speak to the attentive reader of the cruelty and disappointments of a domestic life at the same time as being pleasurable to read, but paradoxically this very mastery has contributed to their dismissal from the academic canon.

¹⁹⁷ Freud, 'Humour', p. 162.

¹⁹⁸ Interestingly, criticism of theatrical comedy does not share this tendency. The romantic comedies of Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde in particular receive a great deal of critical attention.

¹⁹⁹ Chris Baldick, 'Comedy', in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* <www.oxfordreference.com> [accessed 17 February 2009].

²⁰⁰ Gillooly, p. xxv.

Chapter 2

A Comedic 'Response' to War?

Elizabeth von Arnim's *Christopher and Columbus* (1919), *Mr Skeffington* (1940), and Elizabeth Taylor's *At Mrs Lippincote's* (1945)

Until the 1990s, most studies of 'war literature' were primarily concerned with writing by men that dealt with the battlefield and men's combat experience. Since then, several feminist scholars including Claire Tylee, Gill Plain, Jenny Hartley and Phyllis Lassner have reinscribed women's writing into accounts of both World War I and II. In their reappraisal of the writing of the period these scholars have turned attention to fiction considered middlebrow, and their studies of women's wartime writing form a significant proportion of the criticism that addresses the 'feminine middlebrow'.

Claire Tylee's aim in *The Great War and Women's Consciousness* (1990) is to discover whether there exists an imaginative memory of World War I which is distinctively women's.¹ Jenny Hartley's *Millions Like Us: British Women's Fiction of the Second World War* and Phyllis Lassner's *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of Their Own* (both published in 1997) aim to challenge accounts of the period which argue that, unlike in World War I, novelists failed to respond to the impact of World War II, and that the work of literary value from this period was produced only by men. Lassner notes that 'many surveys of British World War II literature reflect critical values that predetermine the neglect of women's war writing. By defining war literature as representing combat experience, critics omit the writing of those who merely suffered through the Blitz, the aerial bombardment of British cities in 1940 and 1941, and for whom home front and battlefield merged.'² Lassner argues that as so many significant women writers of the period remain out-of-print, unavailable, and unexamined, 'an entire front of the war is still buried'.³ One of these re-examined writers is Elizabeth Taylor: her 1945 novel *At Mrs*

¹ Claire M. Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writing, 1914-64* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1990), p. 15.

² Phyllis Lassner, *British Women Writers of World War II* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1997), p. 2.

³ Lassner, p. 2.

Lippincote's is utilised by both Lassner and Hartley to support their theses on women writers' responses to war.

Of all the novels discussed in this thesis, Taylor's *At Mrs Lippincote's* has received by far the most critical attention.⁴ The novel makes frequent appearances in Nicola Humble's *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel* (2001), along with several other Taylor novels, to demonstrate recurring themes in the middlebrow novel: the use of characters' reading matter to make links with other, highbrow, novels, and as a method of characterisation; the focus 'literally and metaphorically' on the house and how women writers expressed modernity in this context.⁵ In fact, *At Mrs Lippincote's* is used so often to illustrate Humble's themes that it might be regarded as a paradigmatic feminine middlebrow novel.

The interest of Humble, Lassner and Hartley in women's middlebrow writing is primarily thematic, rather than stylistic. In considering the novels of Taylor and von Arnim in the context of war, I want to focus on form, an element neglected in the existing criticism of Taylor and of the feminine middlebrow in general. I have called my chapter 'responses' to war in inverted commas because both novelists demonstrate that war does not require a new literary form. What is striking about *At Mrs Lippincote's* (1945), *Christopher and Columbus* (1919) and *Mr Skeffington* (1940) is that in 'responding' to war their use of form is not significantly different from that utilised in their other novels. There is continuity of form in these novels, both from the 19th century women novelists they claim as their antecedents, and within their own careers. Their chosen comedic and ironic form shows itself to be as well suited to depicting the impact of war on the 'women in the drawing room' as it is to the peacetime difficulties and desolations of women's lives. In this thesis I will show how Taylor and von Arnim use comedy to write remarkably dark novels, and demonstrate how both the technique and the darkness persist whether the novel deals with the impact of war, the meanings of marriage or the trials of ageing.

⁴ See also N. H. Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2008) and Florence Leclercq, *Elizabeth Taylor* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), both book-length critical studies of Taylor, and John Brannigan, 'No Home of One's Own: Elizabeth Taylor's *At Mrs Lippincote's*', in *Women's Writing 1945-60: After the Deluge*, ed. by Jane Dowson (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

⁵ Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, p. 112.

I will turn first to von Arnim's *Christopher and Columbus*. In contrast to *At Mrs Lippincote's*, this 'war novel' has received no detailed criticism in English. (This is true of all Elizabeth von Arnim's novels, with the exception of her early works *Elizabeth and her German Garden* [1898], *The Solitary Summer* [1899], *The Pastor's Wife* [1914] and the critically successful *Vera* [1921].)⁶ *Christopher and Columbus* is undeniably political, yet von Arnim's mastery of the comedic form and her reputation for delightful entertainment is such that her second biographer, Karen Osborne, can conclude that the novel 'hardly mentioned the war at all and concentrated relentlessly on the frivolities to be encountered on the West Coast of America'.⁷

Elizabeth von Arnim's *Christopher and Columbus* (1919)

Paul Fussell argues in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) that World War I created a decisive break in the mode of literary representation: a before and after. In painting a picture of this enormous change in values, and in artistic language and expression, Fussell reproduces the hierarchies of the 'battle of the brows'. He lists the 1920s modernist greats (all male) that had yet to make an appearance, and comments that, in their absence, the pre-war 'literary scene is hard to imagine'. Without the modernists 'one read Hardy and Kipling and Conrad and frequented worlds of traditional moral action delineated in traditional moral language'.⁸ Fussell argues that the distinctive change the war brings is irony. 'Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war

⁶ See Juliane Roemhild, '“Betwixt and Between”: Reading von Arnim Writing Elizabeth', *Working Papers on the Web*, 11 (July 2008) <<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/middlebrow/index.html>> [accessed 7 July 2009], Jennifer Shepherd, 'Marketing Middlebrow Feminism: Elizabeth von Arnim, the New Woman and the Fin-de-Siecle Book Market', *Philological Quarterly*, 84:1 (2005) pp. 105-131, the section on von Arnim in Glen Cavaliero, *The Alchemy of Laughter: Comedy in English Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), and rather oddly Bernice L. Hausman, 'Between Science and Nature: Interpreting Lactation Failure in Elizabeth von Arnim's *The Pastor's Wife*', *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 20 (1999). Hausman's article makes the point that von Arnim's depiction of the difficulties of child bearing and breast feeding was both shocking and politically radical at the time it was published. There is one book-length critical study of von Arnim, Marianne Flassbeck's *Gauklerin der Literatur: Elizabeth von Arnim und der weibliche Humor* (Rüsselsheim: Christel Götttert, 2003) [*The Female Imposter of Literature: Elizabeth von Arnim and Female Humour*], which examines *Elizabeth and her German Garden* (1898), *Vera* (1921), *The Enchanted April* (1922) and *Love* (1925). This work is highly pertinent to my own study, but unfortunately there is not an English translation. I have a brief account of the book from an English-language review by Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, *Zeitschrift F R Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 2004, 52.3, pp. 303-304.

⁷ Karen Osborne, 'Elizabeth', *The Author of Elizabeth and her German Garden* (London: The Bodley Head, 1986), p. 210.

⁸ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 23.

constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends. In the Great War eight million people were destroyed because two persons, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his Consort, had been shot.⁹ One reason, Fussell argues, that the Great War was more ironic than any other, is that 'its beginning was more innocent'. His logic is that 'irony is the attendant of hope, and the fuel of hope is innocence'.¹⁰

Rosa Maria Bracco takes issue with the dichotomy that Fussell creates between traditional, stable values, and the ironic modern mode. She argues that there is a continuity of traditional literary representations after the war, which she evidences through her analysis of selected interwar middlebrow texts.¹¹ That non-ironic representations of the war continued to be influential is, I think, indisputable. What is apparent in an analysis of *Christopher and Columbus*, however, is that while there *is* a continuity pre- and post-World War I in von Arnim's middlebrow novels, it is of an ironic mode. This is the mode that von Arnim had used since her first novel of 1898, continues to use in this 1919 novel, until, with her last novel *Mr Skeffington* (1940), she faltered. If, as Fussell theorises, the post-war irony is a product of pre-war innocence, then von Arnim's continuity of mode is explained: von Arnim was never innocent. Her pre-war novels, especially *The Pastor's Wife* (1914), are characterised by a similarly knowing, satirical understanding of both societal mores and individual relationships as that evident post-war. Fussell is able to reach his bold theory of a decisive break in representation though a very narrow selection of literary texts. He considers only male writers to demonstrate both the 'before' and 'after', and treats modernism as if it were the only literary form of the post-war period. A wider selection of texts would have challenged his theory: feminine middlebrow novels both pre and post-war utilised an ironic mode, as the example of von Arnim will demonstrate. While von Arnim is not unique in her use of the ironic mode, she is unique, to my knowledge, in her application of this mode to such potentially tragic material.

⁹ Fussell, p. 7-8.

¹⁰ Fussell, p. 18.

¹¹ Rosa Maria Bracco, *British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War* (Oxford, Berg Publishers Ltd, 1993).

When Elizabeth von Arnim published *Christopher and Columbus* in 1919, she was a well established, popular novelist, with a reputation for delightful wit, penetrating satire, and a playful, ironic tone. She chose, for her tenth novel, to write a romantic comedy about twin sisters, of mixed English/German parentage, displaced by the war. This might appear, to a 21st century reader, to be rather bizarre in itself, yet as Jane Potter points out, many popular novelists took on the narrative possibilities offered by the war, and ‘rose to the challenge of creating “amusing” and “light” tales of entertainment while at the same time performing a patriotic function’.¹² However, there are significant differences between the fiction identified by Potter, and von Arnim’s novel. Like Bracco, Potter examines the novels that use the ‘traditional moral language’ described by Fussell. ‘Values are [...] blatantly obvious; very little in these novels is open to interpretive chance.’¹³ Potter argues that ‘the novelists who did weave the War into their storylines incorporated and expressed accepted notions of national duty, gender roles, and cultural difference’.¹⁴ Von Arnim’s novel, in contrast, does leave her values ‘open to interpretive chance’: this is a challenging narrative about identity, nationalism and gender relations, yet the reassuring form of romantic comedy makes it possible for the novel to be read – as her biographer Karen Usborne does – as simply light entertainment.

Set in 1916, *Christopher and Columbus* tells the story of twin seventeen-year-old girls Anna-Felicitas and Anna-Rose von Twinkler, who have grown up in Pomerania with their German father and English mother. On the outbreak of war, their father being already dead, they travel with their mother to England. Unfortunately their mother soon dies too, and the twins are left with their maternal aunt in England. Their uncle, like England in general, is vehemently anti-German and he sends the girls on to America (still a neutral country) with £200 and letters of introduction to some putative friends. On the steamer to New York the twins meet a Mr Twist, who takes on the role of friend and protector; in America a series of mishaps prevent the girls from going to the designated friends, and Mr Twist continues his role as guardian. At every turn the twins face suspicion about their nationality, and ostracism once it is confirmed.

¹² Jane Potter, *Boys in Khaki, Girls in Print: Women’s Literary Responses to the Great War 1914-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), p. 7.

¹³ Potter, p. 92.

¹⁴ Potter, p. 7.

The twins' nationality is that of their father: German.¹⁵ However, von Arnim stresses that these girls are neither one thing nor the other, not within themselves, nor outwardly. Their use of language marks them apart:

Their German bristled with mistakes. [...] Almost the last thing their father, an accurate man, said to them as he lay dying, had to do with a misplaced dative. And when they talked English it rolled about uncontrollably on its r's and had a great many long words in it got from Milton, and Dr Johnson, and people like that.¹⁶

In Germany, therefore, no one would believe they are German, and in England no one will believe they are English. The twins' enthusiasm for classic English writers of the 17th and 18th centuries does not help them communicate in England in 1916. They use language learned from books in their everyday speech, so that although it is English – and ironically part of that quintessentially English heritage one presumes the country is fighting to protect – it is almost as foreign a language to the people they meet as German.

In *Christopher and Columbus* there are obvious links between the novel and von Arnim's own life. Born in Australia and raised in England, she had herself experienced life as an outsider; the culture shock of her marriage to the German Count, Graf Henning August von Arnim-Schlagenthin, was deeply felt. Their early married life was spent in Berlin and the difference between this highly restrictive, upper-class society and Elizabeth von Arnim's upper-middle-class English upbringing was profound, and she struggled to acquire both the language and the necessary understanding of German etiquette. As Countess von Arnim she

¹⁵ The law in this area is complex. According to the Naturalisation Act of 1870 a British woman lost her nationality on marriage to a foreigner. However, the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act 1914 dictated that widows were allowed to resume British subject status, as von Arnim did after escaping from Switzerland in 1914. Children who had lost British subject status as a result of their parent's naturalisation as an alien were allowed to resume British subject status by personal declaration within one year of reaching the age of 21. So it is possible that the twins could become British. However, as their mother had become German on marriage the twins have never been British, so perhaps they could not 'resume' British status. After her naturalisation von Arnim told her son that he was at least half English, but beyond that von Arnim's biography does not mention her children becoming British.
<http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/ind/en/home/laws__policy/policy_instructions/nis/a-b/british_nationality.Maincontent.0001.file.tmp/BRITISH%20NAT%20SUMMARY.pdf> [accessed 12th December 2005].

¹⁶ Elizabeth von Arnim, *Christopher and Columbus* (1919; London: Virago, 1994), p. 6. Subsequent references will be in parenthesis in the text.

raised her children in Pomerania until 1909 (her husband died in 1910), and lived abroad for much of her life.

Von Arnim has thus given the amusingly named characters Anna-Felicitas and Anna-Rose von Twinkler the politically fraught parentage of her own children. The implications of this parentage, she knew from experience, were extremely serious. As Germans, von Arnim and her family were only able to escape from Switzerland to England in 1914 using the British passports of an Arnold family, smuggled out to them. Once in England, von Arnim was accepted for naturalisation, thus saving her daughters Evi and Liebet from deportation or internment. Unfortunately their accents still immediately gave away their nationality, like the 'Annas'. Evi and Liebet were forced to report each day at the local police station and forbidden to travel without special permission.¹⁷ Von Arnim's second marriage to Earl Russell in 1916 was kept secret because the news could have been dangerous to her two daughters Trix and Felicitas, who were still in Germany and needed to retain their German identity. Von Arnim 'escaped' again in 1916, travelling by ship (chased by a German submarine) to the United States.¹⁸

Although the links between life and fiction are obvious, they are not straightforward. While it is remarkable that von Arnim was able to transform such serious emotional material into a romantic comedy, her epistolary novel *Christine* (1917) fictionalised even more tragic events. In 1916 von Arnim's daughter Felicitas, still in Germany, died from pneumonia. In *Christine*, this becomes a young girl's death from pneumonia that is entirely caused by the actions of the Germans on the outbreak of war. Felicitas's circumstances, however, were rather different. She had, according to von Arnim's daughter Liebet, been 'banished' by her mother to a school in Germany for her bad behaviour and died there 'alone and cared for only by strangers'.¹⁹ Liebet wrote: 'The tragic death of the heroine of the book is therefore

¹⁷ Osborne, p. 182.

¹⁸ Osborne, p. 197. This time the impetus was not war, but the need to get away from the tyrannical Russell.

¹⁹ Leslie de Charms, *Elizabeth of the German Garden* (London: Heinemann, 1958), p. 158. This is the first biography of von Arnim, written by her daughter Liebet. Interestingly, Osborne's version of events is rather different, perhaps accepting von Arnim's assertion that her daughter's death was caused as much by the war as a soldier's at the front. (Osborne, p. 193.)

due to the war – not only in the interest of propaganda but to meet a very dire need for self-justification.²⁰

Christine was published as non-fiction: it pretended to be the letters home of an English girl living in Berlin in the months leading up to the outbreak of war, and the book came complete with a preface by ‘Alice Cholmondeley’ (a quintessentially English name), the grieving mother. Ironically, this novel that pretends to be real is in some ways more fictional than many of her novels. Von Arnim was not, for the background of *Christine*, drawing on personal experience. She had not lived in Berlin since the 1890s, and drew heavily on the account of her housekeeper Teppi for her depiction of the outbreak of war.²¹ This caused discrepancies. A reviewer in the *Yorkshire Post* thought it strange that the Germans were represented as being ‘offensively abusive of England. [...] Our own experience, and that of many of whom we have read, was that the Germans were extremely polite to English people, down to the very beginning of the war’.²² An extract from the novel is included in Angela Smith’s *Women’s Writing of the First World War: An Anthology* (2000) as ‘an impression of a people hungry for war’, demonstrating the dangers of reading fiction as straightforward social history.²³ *Christine* was, according to de Charms, von Arnim’s conscious contribution to the war effort. Finding the ‘energetic propaganda of indiscriminate hatred’ to be unappealing to ‘the educated’, von Arnim sought to write a more palatable, better quality piece of propaganda.²⁴ Yet, typically of von Arnim, this is not a straightforward piece of propaganda, espousing accepted notions of nationhood. As well as depicting a people grown ugly with the lust for war she finds room for sympathetic Germans, including the officer that Christine becomes engaged to marry.²⁵

²⁰ De Charms, p. 189.

²¹ Osborne, p. 178-9 and de Charms, p. 40.

²² Quoted in De Charms, p. 40.

²³ Angela K. Smith, ed., *Women’s Writing of the First World War: An Anthology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 12. *Christine* is also mentioned as ‘pro-war novel’ in Terry Phillips, ‘The Rules of War: Gothic Transgressions in First World War Fiction’ *Gothic Studies*, 2000, 2.2, pp. 232-244, p. 239.

²⁴ De Charms, p. 188. The novel was extremely popular, and is 6th in the list of American bestsellers for 1917. John Unsworth, ‘20th-Century American Bestsellers’, <<http://www3.isrl.illinois.edu/~unsworth/courses/bestsellers/>> [accessed 24 May 2010].

²⁵ Karen Osborne writes that a play by von Arnim was turned down by a theatrical agent who informed her that ‘no play where the heroine fell in love with a German could possibly be considered for the stage’, yet she wrote a successful piece of propaganda with *Christine*, in which the heroine does just that.

Christine is also notable for its departure from von Arnim's usual style. Comedy is absent, the style of the letters is gushing and sentimental, and the relationship between mother and daughter idealised. Once the novel was sent to her publisher, Macmillan, perhaps feeling that her duty had been done, von Arnim began the 'hilarious' *Christopher and Columbus*.²⁶ *Christine*, despite being a piece of propaganda by a popular novelist, is not one of the "amusing" and "light" tales of entertainment' identified by Potter; paradoxically, it is *Christopher and Columbus* that appears to fit this mould. However, appearances are deceptive. The 1919 novel can be read as a satirical swipe at the romantic war-time novels read by Potter, which follow

the underlying trajectory of fairy tales in which the hero embarks on a quest, encounters obstacles to his progress, overcomes these impediments, is transfigured by his experiences, and ultimately generates the story's happy ending. The working out of the mystery and/or the transformation of hero or heroine brings order to where there was chaos.²⁷

The Annas comfort themselves as they set sail for America by imagining themselves as entering upon a quest: "We're Christopher and Columbus," said Anna-Rose quickly, "and we're going to discover America". (p. 5) This novel is, as is typical of the feminine middlebrow novel, a self-conscious literary production. *Christopher and Columbus* explicitly signals its use of the romantic comedy form in order to play with it; the novel 'has it both ways' with enjoyment of the romance paralleled by a subversion of that form in order to challenge accepted notions of gender, nationality and manners. (This use of form recurs in the novels of both von Arnim and Taylor, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3.) The novel also demonstrates a typically middlebrow concern with the importance of reading: dreamy Anna-Felicitas, 'a born bungler with her hands and feet', is utterly incompetent in her short-lived job as a nurse because of the distractions of reading:

"It's because she's thinking of something else," Anna-Rose tried eagerly to explain to the indignant sister-in-charge.

"Thinking of something else!" echoed the sister.

"She reads, you see, a lot – whenever she gets the chance she reads –"

"Reads!" echoed the sister.

"And then, you see, she gets thinking –"

²⁶ De Charms, p. 190.

²⁷ Potter, p. 93.

“Thinking! Reading doesn’t make *me* think.” (p. 22)

Arnim portrays an English society where practical, right-thinking people are suspicious of reading and intellectual life. The sister represents the majority when she protests: “Thinking! Reading doesn’t make *me* think”, and in mocking her, von Arnim invites the reader to join her in a superior understanding of how important reading - particularly intellectually stimulating reading - is. The sister is a stab at those who read to ‘relax’ and an attempt to differentiate herself from this type of reading and readership. Despite her popularity and reputation for entertainment, von Arnim did not see her own novels as merely ‘light’ reads, as is demonstrated by her targeting of *Christine* to the ‘educated’. Significantly, the twins do not read what might be regarded as fellow middlebrow novels.²⁸ Instead there are mentions of Dr Johnson, Milton, Keats, and Lewis Carroll; all of them white, male, dead and canonical. Nicola Humble argues that ‘middlebrow fiction laid claim to the highbrow by assuming an easy familiarity with its key texts and attitudes’.²⁹ Paradoxically, while Humble identifies this kind of reading as typically middlebrow, the ease with which the twins can access highbrow culture is crucial in differentiating this reading from the kind of cultural aspiration that Q. D. Leavis attacked as middlebrow.

In contrast to the twins, the American Mr Twist makes a conscious and clumsy attempt to gain cultural capital. He carries in his pocket an American collection of English poetry called ‘Masterpieces You Must Master’, ‘professing in its preface to be a Short Cut to Culture’. Like the twins his pronunciation marks him out as other, and the effect of his ‘strange exotic’ accent as he reads out Wordsworth’s ‘Ode to Dooty’ is ‘as if someone should dig a majestic Gregorian psalm in its ribs and make it leap and giggle’ (p. 78). In the taxonomy of characterisation indicated by reading, that he reads Wordsworth signifies that he is a sympathetic character, but the form it takes, and his *efforts* to learn it demonstrates his unsophistication. (Anna-Felicitas, young and innocent though she is ‘considered that, if these things were short-cuts to anywhere, seeing she knew them all by heart she must have long ago got there, snoozed complacently’ p. 79.) Thus, in this novel that may be regarded

²⁸ They could, for example, read Rose Macaulay, whose novel *What Not* (1919) was reviewed with *Christopher and Columbus* under the heading ‘Two Novels of Worth’ by Katherine Mansfield in *The Athenaeum*, 11 April 1919.

²⁹ Humble, p. 29.

as typically middlebrow in its attitude to reading, von Arnim mocks the profoundly middlebrow pursuit of 'achievable' culture.³⁰ That she can do this comically reinforces the sense of von Arnim's ease: her reader, she is confident, will share the culturally superior urge to giggle at the thought of the 'Ode to Dooty'.

Mr Twist enters the story by offering the twins some brandy as the ship zigzags to avoid a torpedo. Is he the male romantic lead? In another example of self-conscious intertextuality, Anna-Felicitas is aware that the narrative clues suggest that he is, for he has wiped their faces when they cried, an activity 'after which in a book you married him' (p. 76).

However, his looks do not quite deliver. "I expect God got tired of him over that last bit," she mused, "and just put on any sort of head" (p. 77). It is not very promising, yet, as Anna-Felicitas and the reader suspect, he *is* the romantic lead. Von Arnim happily subverts the expectations of the romantic comedy with Mr Twist, and his looks are only the beginning. He is a millionaire, which is always helpful, but his fortune comes from his interest in domestic matters – he has invented and patented a new kind of teapot, Twist's Non-Trickler Teapot. He is a staunch humanitarian who is on the steamer because he is returning from France after a year driving an ambulance there, and he deplores what Uncle Arthur's patriotism has led him to do to the twins. He is not the typical romantic lead of a war-time romance, fighting for King and country: 'patriotism was nothing at any time to Mr. Twist compared to humanity' (p. 94). On top of this, his most prominent characteristic is his motherliness. 'He would have loved, though he had never known it, the sensation of pattering feet about his house, and small hands clinging to the apron he would never wear.' (p. 123) Mr Twist's unsuitability as romantic lead is further demonstrated by his reading matter: attempting to educate himself, he is hardly in a position to take up the didactic position typical of the older lover in romantic fiction. The twins' knowledge of 'good' literature is better than his.

³⁰ This discrepancy is mirrored in von Arnim's own reading habits, as compared to those enacted in her novels. Juliane Roemhild's analysis of *Elizabeth and her German Garden* (1898) and *The Solitary Summer* (1899) demonstrates that while von Arnim did read the 'highbrow' texts described by her alter-ego 'Elizabeth' in the novels, 'von Arnim judiciously omitted from Elizabeth's reading list some of the popular novels found in her own library,' and in reality preferred her 'classics in translation and scientific and philosophical works in popularised form'. Roemhild suggests 'Von Arnim could be credited with having created the paradoxical figure of a middlebrow reader of highbrow literature'. Juliane Roemhild, "Betwixt and Between": Reading von Arnim Writing Elizabeth', *Working Papers on the Web*, 11 (July 2008) <<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/middlebrow/index.html>>, no page numbers [accessed 7 July 2009].

The character of Mr Twist demonstrates that comedy is not necessarily trivialising or reductive. Von Arnim does not mock him; despite his comic incongruity, it is Mr Twist, rather than the twins, who is the complex emotional heart of the novel. There is continual pathos in the thwarting of his motherly nature in a society that will never allow him to feel the tug of little hands on his apron, and will never allow him, as a single man, to be a suitable guardian to the twins. Mr Twist takes the twins home to his mother, expecting them to find sanctuary there, but she is utterly unable to understand why she should take them in, and he is forced to face the fact that his mother is selfish and cruel. It is a devastating discovery for Mr Twist:

[...] for years, away down hidden somewhere inside him, he had doubted his mother; for years he had, shocked at himself, covered up and trampled on these unworthy doubts indignantly. He had doubted her unselfishness; he had doubted her sympathy and kindness; he had even doubted her honesty, her ordinary honesty with money and accounts; and lately, before he went to Europe, he had caught himself thinking she was cruel. Nevertheless this unexpected naked justification of his doubts was shattering to him. (p. 213)

Mr Twist's mother serves to enact a wider point, and a recurring theme in both von Arnim and Taylor's novels, that conventional social mores can be cruel and hypocritical. In *Christopher and Columbus* the plot is driven by the twins' need to find a 'suitable' home where there is a woman in the household, but each community they encounter rejects them. Mrs Twist is not a cruel anomaly but a representative of her town, Clark:

She now instantly believed the worst.
It was the habit of Clark to believe the worst. Clark was very small, and therefore also very virtuous. Each inhabitant was the careful guardian of his neighbour's conduct. But as Nature insists on a balance, the minds of Clark dwelt curiously on evil. They were minds active in suspicion. They leapt with instantaneous agility at the worst conclusions. (p. 202)

Christopher and Columbus ranges across continents, yet nothing changes; wherever they go the twins find themselves at the mercy of strictly controlled communities, like the 'very small' and 'very virtuous' Clark. These small communities are highly reminiscent of those in Jane Austen's novels, and indeed, von Arnim's description recalls the famous speech of

Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* (1818): 'a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies'.³¹ Despite crossing the Atlantic to the 'land of the free' von Arnim, like Austen, depicts a society where all members hold each other under surveillance. Virtuous village life encourages the worst kind of small-minded thinking: Von Arnim argues that if 'nature insists on a balance' virtuous and small lives are naturally inclined to look for evil, and this willingness to leap to the worst conclusions with 'instantaneous agility' is in itself a kind of evil. In California, the twins and Mr Twist are under suspicious surveillance since their arrival at the ironically named Cosmopolitan hotel, in Acapulco. Von Arnim explains that it is the November before America came into the war, and 'the feeling in Acapulco was violently anti-German' (p. 380); the community suspects that the twins, such apparently innocent young girls, are just the sort of spies the Germans with their 'bottomless artfulness' would choose (p. 382).

The serious section of Acapulco, the section that thought, hit on this explanation of the Twinklers with no difficulty whatever once its suspicions were roused, because it was used to being able to explain everything instantly. It was proud of its explanation, and presented it to the town with much the same air of deprecating but conscious achievement with which one presents drinking fountains. (p. 382)

The machinations of this small American town are damned comprehensively by von Arnim. This, she stresses, is from the 'section that thought', yet they too leap instantly to conclusions; Acapulco sees its (entirely inaccurate) assessment of the twins as simply an extension of their civic responsibilities. The analogy of the presentation of drinking fountains is comic, but serious. This is an ordinary town, von Arnim stresses, with ordinary people, yet they find 'no difficulty' in moving instantly to dangerous accusations. When a letter from Mrs Twist arrives confirming that the twins are German, the people of Acapulco pleurably conclude that *all* their suspicions were correct. In this novel that might at first sight be mistaken for one of the patriotic, romantic novels discussed by Potter, von Arnim

³¹ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1818; Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2000) p. 144. Austen was also, like von Arnim, writing her novel during a war. Warren Roberts argues that 'Austen was referring to actual spies who were serving or trying to serve Pitt and the government and whose purpose was to crush the various agents of radicalism and subversion. [...] Austen wrote the novel during the very period when the activity of spies was at a peak and the atmosphere was highly charged with fear and suspicion'. Warren Roberts, *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* (London: The Athlone Press, 1995) p. 29. If this is the case, von Arnim is again similar to Austen in that the political content of their novels is overlooked.

asserts the primacy of humanitarianism over patriotism. There is a particular kind of evil, this novel posits, in the pleasure felt by the conventionally virtuous in excluding and condemning those who might contaminate their respectability. This can, however, be regarded as a typically female 'response' to war, according to Claire Tylee: 'Women's literary responses to war [...] tend to be much wider and more subtle in scope than battle-tales, since they are interested in the social context of belligerence and its connection with personal relations and the quality of ordinary life'.³²

Von Arnim suggests that it is evil to reject the twins simply because they are German. Yet, of course, their nationality is not simple, and von Arnim continually exploits the comic potential of the twins' ambiguous and fraught situation. Through the wide-eyed, innocent twins, von Arnim renders a serious issue absurd: "If there hadn't been a war we'd have been all right," said Anna-Felicitas. "But directly there's war, whoever it is you've married, if it isn't one of your own countrymen, rises up against you, just as if he were too many meringues you'd had for dinner." (p. 72) As I discuss in the next chapter, von Arnim will frequently express difficult truths through a comic juxtaposition with domestic mundanities: here the danger of being identified as an enemy alien is simply the nauseous return of too much pudding. Von Arnim thus uses comedy to simultaneously amuse and challenge the attentive reader; the notion of a foreign husband rising up like meringue is funny, but it does not trivialise the issue; on the contrary, it renders it absurd, and exposes the situation for the terrible arbitrary madness it is. Von Arnim shows a similar ironic contempt for romantic patriotism. In searching for a job while still in England the twins answer an advertisement from a 'slightly wounded Officer' looking for a companion. His reply makes them uncomfortable: "It's for jolly little English kids like you that we're fighting. God bless you. Write to me again soon." (p. 28) How would the English Officer feel if he knew who the twins 'really' are?

Von Arnim's challenges to popular notions of national identity and patriotism could be a reaction to the habit of 'gross dichotomizing' that Paul Fussell suggests originates in the Great War. In this thinking "We" are all here on this side; "the enemy" is over there. "We" are individuals with names and personal identities; "he" is a mere collective entity'. Fussell

³² Tylee, p. 13.

continues: 'One of the legacies of the war is [just] this habit of simple distinction, simplification, and opposition. If truth is the main casualty in war, ambiguity is another.'³³ The characters of Anna-Rose and Anna-Felicitas might have been designed precisely to assert the existence and importance of ambiguity. The title of the novel itself suggests a split identity: in setting out for the new world, the twins immediately identify themselves not as Christopher Columbus, but as Christopher *and* Columbus. If they are identified as German, their individual identities are erased, and they become merely the collective 'other'.

The portrayal of the twins engages the reader further by making them perform a kind of comic wish-fulfilment. Anna-Felicitas, for example, muses on the paunch as the beginning of 'middle-ageing':

"One middle-ages first, and from there it just spreads. It must be queer," she added pensively, "to watch oneself gradually rotting."

These were the sort of observations, Mr Twist felt, that might prejudice his mother against the twins. [...]

Their leading characteristic, he had observed, was candour. They had no *savoir faire*. They seemed incapable of anything but naturalness, and their particular type of naturalness was not one, he was afraid, that his mother would understand.

(p. 97)

From a Bergsonian perspective, the relentlessly 'natural' behaviour of the twins could be regarded as a kind of automatism: their reactions are a 'series of repetitions', like the comic clockwork puppet posited by Bergson. They also conform entirely to his idea of the comic character as one who expresses, 'above all else, a special lack of adaptability to society'.³⁴ Yet the laughter caused by the twins does not perform the conservative function that Bergson theorises. Bergson argues that 'It is the part of laughter to reprove [the comic individual's] absentmindedness and wake him out of his dream'. In his view laughter is thus socially corrective, bringing the comic figure back into line with societal norms.³⁵ In von Arnim's comic world, however, the reader would be appalled if the twins were 'broken

³³ Fussell, p. 75, 80.

³⁴ Henri Bergson, 'Laughter', in *Comedy*, ed. by Wylie Sypher (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), p. 146.

³⁵ Bergson, p. 147.

in' to join the virtuous residents of Clark and Acapulco in their limited and suspicious societies. Instead, the twins perform a comic wish-fulfilment for the reader, in which they say with beautiful candour all the things that we may think, but inhibited by social restraint, are unable to say.

It is therefore Freud's theorisation of comedy, rather than Bergson's, that comes closest to an explanation of the comedy of the twins. Freud argues that the 'tendentious' joke functions as a form of psychological release: 'An impulse or urge is present which seeks to release pleasure from a particular source and, if it were allowed free play, would release it. Besides this, another urge is present which works against this generation of pleasure - inhibits it, that is, or suppresses it'.³⁶ For Freud, it is this inhibition that causes most of the pleasure of a joke: there is first the simple pleasure of the joke, but then the 'incomparably greater' pleasure of lifting repressions. The twins enact this process for the reader. Unencumbered by inhibition, the twins are 'allowed free play', and through them the reader, who *is* inhibited, experiences the pleasure of release. It is not, of course, simply the process of experiencing the joke that is significant; it is the content. While the notion of 'free play' may appear to imply triviality, in Freud's conception it does not. In free play we are able to express something serious: the truth.³⁷ Thus, in *Christopher and Columbus* the comic free play of the twins enables von Arnim to express her truths about manners, gender relations, and nationality.

Katherine Mansfield, reviewing *Christopher and Columbus* for *The Athenaeum* saw that the plot was potentially 'tragic', yet 'Above and through everything runs their [the twins] laughter – their laughing comment upon the grown-up world and its ways. And this it is which is irresistible'. Mansfield continues:

We are still very dazed, very dumb and stiff after the four years' winter sleep; the winter has lasted too long; our sleep has been like death. We are dazed creatures, "lizards of convalescence," creeping back into the sun. And then, in the quiet, we

³⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (Harmondsworth: Penguin: 1976), p. 186.

³⁷ Freud, p. 152.

hear *Christopher and Columbus* laughing – laughing at everything. Is it not cruel to make merry after such a winter?³⁸

The context in which this novel is published – immediately after four years of brutal war – is both the cause of its irresistibility and its tendentiousness. The reader feels stiff and inhibited, but, if the pleasure of laughter is in overcoming inhibition, what could be more pleasurable than laughing after a war? After raising the possibility that the laughter may be cruel, Mansfield immediately decides not: ‘But they themselves are spring’. The laughing *Christopher and Columbus*, she believes, is an appropriate response to the end of the war. The *Saturday Review*, similarly impressed with the novel, noted significantly that von Arnim ‘is too clever to treat the theme of mixed or technical nationality “au tragique”’.³⁹

This appreciation of von Arnim’s technique, and understanding of her themes, was not shared by her 1986 biographer, who saw only frivolity.⁴⁰ In contrast, von Arnim’s critical treatment of America was considered particularly comment-worthy by contemporary reviewers: the *Times Literary Supplement* noted that ‘the American people who made difficulties for the Twinklers are drawn – though the touch is delicate – in acid’;⁴¹ Mansfield wrote that ‘so well is the devastating quality of that glance [America’s cold stare] conveyed that it might serve as a warning never to go to America with nothing but your own watery reflection in the mirror for prop and comfort’.⁴² It is a pity that there are not more later accounts of the novel to join with Usborne’s to form a fuller critical picture; from her comments alone the contrast between contemporary and later reading of the novel suggest the difficulties of reading out of context. Rather than seeing frivolity, the *TLS* reviewer was ‘concerned at first by all the silliness which [von Arnim] has avoided. There was opportunity for so much silliness in this tale of twin girls of seventeen who set out to

³⁸ Katherine Mansfield, ‘Two Novels of Worth’, *The Athenaeum*, 11 April 1919. Mansfield’s appreciative review was written before the two writers became friends. As cousins they had met occasionally at family gatherings, but in 1919 they formed a close friendship that, while sometimes fraught, continued until Mansfield’s death in 1923.

³⁹ *Saturday Review*, 22 March 1919.

⁴⁰ Usborne, p. 210.

⁴¹ Harold Child, ‘*Christopher and Columbus*’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 March 1919.

⁴² Mansfield, *The Athenaeum*, 11 April 1919. Americans were clearly not offended by the depiction of their country as *Christopher and Columbus* is at number 9 in the list of American bestsellers in 1919. A comparable list is not available for Britain. John Unsworth, ‘20th-Century American Bestsellers’, <http://www3.isrl.illinois.edu/~unsworth/courses/bestsellers/> [Accessed 24 May 2010].

discover America – silliness of a kind which has so often been displayed!⁴³ Read in the contemporary context it appears, von Arnim is notable for her avoidance of silliness, rather than as a contributor to it.

Elizabeth von Arnim's *Mr Skeffington* (1940)

I turn now to von Arnim's last novel, *Mr Skeffington*. In the twenty years between this and *Christopher and Columbus*, von Arnim had continued to be a highly popular, and, particularly with *Vera* in 1921 (discussed in the next chapter) a critically acclaimed novelist. She continued to use variations and developments on the romantic comedy until with *Mr Skeffington* this form faltered. In intriguing contrast with *Christopher and Columbus*, it appears that while World War I could be dealt with in this form, World War II could not.

Mr Skeffington is the story of Fanny Skeffington, as she approaches her fiftieth birthday. After only five years of married life, and Mr Skeffington's infidelities with seven typists, Fanny had very happily divorced him, and subsequently enjoyed more than twenty years of freedom and lovers. Now, after being very ill with diphtheria and faced by the dreaded birthday, Job Skeffington has appeared in her mind again: 'If she shut her eyes, she could see him behind the fish-dish at breakfast: and presently, even if she didn't shut her eyes, she could see him behind almost anything.'⁴⁴ Fanny has tried to be sensible,

ordering his chair in the dining room to be removed, even to ordering cold baths. She had soon found out, though, that these measures were no good. The cold baths made her shiver for the rest of the day, and as for the chair, being only a figment, not having one didn't stop Mr Skeffington's sitting down. Figments were like that, she had to acknowledge. (p. 8)

Von Arnim's characters are frequently prone to enlightening reveries, bordering on hallucination, but von Arnim avoids mawkishness with her comedic approach. Here the

⁴³ *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 March 1919.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth von Arnim, *Mr Skeffington* (1940; London: Virago, 1993), p. 1. Subsequent page references will be in parenthesis in the text.

sentences are short, the sentiment common-sensical, and the setting resolutely domestic; it is typical von Arnim to juxtapose the hallucinatory vision of an ex-husband with the breakfast table fish-dish. In an attempt to understand her 'haunting' by Mr Skeffington and what her role in the world might now be, Fanny goes to see her ex-lovers, misguidedly believing these men to be friends to advise her. Fanny's former admirers are all terribly busy: with families, with being important public figures, in one case with ministering to the poor in Bethnal Green. The consistent message she receives is that as one grows old one requires a husband.

In her life was no loving spouse to make her feel important and wonderful. On the contrary, after having been very important and most wonderful for so long to so many people she was rapidly becoming just poor Fanny. She felt it, she knew it, and it was awful. (pp. 114-5)

Fantasy, ironically, has the power to force Fanny to face painful realities. Job Skeffington appears to be haunting her, but unlike *Vera* (another novel named for an absent character who haunts the protagonist) this ghost isn't dead. He is von Arnim's technique for demonstrating Job's dominance in the text, despite his physical absence. Although we will not fully understand this until the conclusion of the novel, the persistent hallucinations of Jewish Job are part of the intrusion of contemporary politics into Fanny's privileged and comfortable existence, and symbolically, of the war into the romantic comedy.

Published in 1940, but set in 1936, *Mr Skeffington* is framed by the contemporary political climate. The change in Fanny is mirrored by the changes in the world around her: 'there was no doubt that London had quite changed'. Her erstwhile admirers, 'instead of seizing every opportunity to whisper amusing things in her ear about – oh well, very silly things, really – they talked out loud of the European situation' (p. 9). Painfully for Fanny, she is forced to realise that not only has she aged, she has been left behind. She is a woman who has failed to change with the times. Her cousin asks:

"Fanny, do you ever hate yourself?" and when she, smiling at such an odd question, and still being very much the adorable, desirable woman, answered, "No. Ought I to?" he looked at her a moment a little thoughtfully, and offering her his cigarette case said, "Well, well – what a time we take to grow up, don't we." (p. 28)

It is a devastating comment, but Fanny 'hadn't an idea what he meant; but as it didn't sound very promising, decided not to ask. Besides, there was an expression on his face as if for two pins he might start talking about the European situation' (p. 28). The problem is that while aging has changed Fanny physically, mentally she is just the same. And the role of 'adorable, desirable' lady of leisure is now doubly inappropriate: no longer suitable for her age, and not suitable for the anxious mid-1930s. Cousin Pontyfridd's comments are very striking: he seems to be saying that Fanny ought to hate herself; that if she grew up, she would. In this novel the aging Fanny's struggles to adapt to the 'European situation' personify the struggles of the novel itself. In *Christopher and Columbus* the romantic comedy of manners was skilfully utilised to convey von Arnim's critique of patriotism, national identity and gender relations, yet as *Mr Skeffington* progresses, it is evident that von Arnim feels her gaiety of form to be as old-fashioned and inappropriate as Fanny's manners.

The poor are louder, more visible and far less polite in *Mr Skeffington* than in any of the previous novels. At Paddington Station Fanny looks like 'a bird of paradise' and 'a knot of harassed women, drooping beneath bundles and babies, watched her, half envious and half shocked' (p. 26). A drunken woman comments loudly that the reason that they are not in first class, full of 'good fried bacon' like Fanny, is because they are respectable: the clear inference is that Fanny is a 'kept' woman (p. 27). Cousin Pontyfridd, who perhaps does 'hate' himself, calls them 'poor devils' and pays for them to have a hot breakfast in the restaurant car. In this scene the poor women articulate a commentary on Fanny that she doesn't quite hear, or understand, but is 'unable not to conjecture it was something about herself and her cousin that wasn't quite nice' (p. 27). It seems only appropriate that Fanny will not quite be able to hear their rude remarks, accustomed as she is to deference and politeness from the lower orders. In contrast to von Arnim's use of free indirect style to express Fanny's perspective, these women give an external viewpoint of Fanny as an extraordinarily insulated woman 'kept' far from the realities of poor people's lives.

As with *Christopher and Columbus*, *Mr Skeffington* offers a surprising conjunction of form and subject: difficult political climates and increasing poverty are not supposed to feature in playful romantic comedies. For Pontyfridd to ask our heroine if she ever hated herself is a

stab as sharp as any Harding identified in Austen of the 'eruption of fear and hatred into the relationships of everyday life'.⁴⁵ Pontyfridd is a sympathetic and loving relation, yet he is highly critical of Fanny, and we may infer, of their shared privileged position. Fanny cannot engage with his question because it is so unexpected, as Harding observes of the 'unexpectedly astringent' speech by Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* (the 'voluntary spies' discussed above): 'in such a speech from such a character the remark is unexpected and unbelievable, with the result that it is quite unlikely to be taken in at all by many readers; it slips through their minds without creating a disturbance'.⁴⁶ It certainly slips through Fanny's mind; she understands enough to think it unpromising, and chooses to ignore it. However, the attentive reader of von Arnim, like the attentive reader of Austen, will receive her 'unexpectedly astringent' message that Fanny is blind to the new realities of the world around her.

The reviews of *Mr Skeffington* were generally positive; they found a happy balance between social satire and good-humoured wit. *The Saturday Review*, for example, noted that:

Her satire glances from one person to another, and before she is through with them she has thrust her rapier through Fanny's lovers as well as herself; yet her book is written in the best of humor. Elizabeth is, indeed, a highly civilised writer, blest with wit enough to give pungency to her social satire and sensibility enough to give it feeling.⁴⁷

This could indeed be a description of an Austen novel, and as Harding argues of Austen, I think that von Arnim's wit is not always in 'the best of humour'. Yet these deviations from good humour can slip through, as in *Christopher and Columbus*, without 'creating a disturbance'. Von Arnim gives some of her most barbed wit to Miss Hyslup, the sister of one of the men Fanny had once counted among her admirers, now a clergyman. Miss Hyslup is living a life of economy and denial ministering to the poor in the East End, and presumes that Fanny, with her fur coat and perfume, is a prostitute. However, she finds she is able to regard her fondly: 'one could feel affection for everybody, positively everybody,

⁴⁵ D. W. Harding, 'Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen' in *Regulated Hatred and Other Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. by Monica Lawlor (London: Athlone Press, 1998), p. 10.

⁴⁶ Harding, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Amy Loveman, 'Mrs. S. on Mr. S.'s Stage', *The Saturday Review*, 6 April 1940.

she had discovered, simply by realizing they were doomed'. Fanny's 'impressive clothes' are merely 'the wages of sin' (p. 142). 'How could one feel anything but tenderness towards a poor thing who was dressed from head to foot in Death?' Charitable Miss Hyslup is able to stop herself recoiling from Fanny's painted fingernails by remembering 'they too merely represented so much Death. [...] odd how pleasant it was possible to be by merely calling up a picture of someone else's death' (p. 143). Thus Miss Hyslup's apparent good nature and manners are driven by the vision of Fanny's doom and imminent death. In the 'best of humour'? Perhaps not. Fanny later wonders whether 'one ought to mind being taken for a prostitute' (p. 154). She might also mind had she known Miss Hyslup was picturing her death.

Some reviewers were alert to this barbed wit, and were unamused. The *Manchester Guardian* thought *Mr Skeffington* to be 'by no means untouched by cruelty'.

Less amusing, if amusing at all, is the case of the once fashionable Kensington clergyman who turned East End priest with vows of celibacy and of fasting. His sister, dominated by him and committed to share that life, is certainly not amusing. Gilbert himself was never more cruel to an old maid.⁴⁸

As Harding argues of Austen's readers, laughter is only enjoyable and 'good natured' so long as 'the assault on society could be regarded as a mock assault and not genuinely disruptive'.⁴⁹ Von Arnim here is genuinely disruptive: in her portrait of Miss Hyslup she again attacks the supposedly virtuous, as she did in her depictions of the small communities of Clark and Acapulco in *Christopher and Columbus*.⁵⁰ In von Arnim's view it is Miss Hyslup who is cruel; her virtuous good manners, von Arnim devastatingly reveals, are only achieved by picturing Fanny's death. However, while the reviewer is correct that there is cruelty in von Arnim's novel, cruelty does not preclude comedy. It is ironic and darkly comic that Miss Hyslup, who at first glance appears to be a powerless and pitiable figure, controls the encounter in this way.

⁴⁸ Harold Brighouse, 'Novels of the Past and the Present', *Manchester Guardian*, 30 November 1940.

⁴⁹ Harding, p. 12.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Taylor launches a similar attack in her novel *The Soul of Kindness* (1964), in which she depicts a character's 'meaning well' as inflicting pain and tragedy on others.

Mr Skeffington contains perhaps von Arnim's most sustained focus on manners, and may truly be called a 'comedy of manners'. The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer called *Mr Skeffington* 'Elizabeth at Her Best': 'only Elizabeth could sketch with such naughtiness, such penetration and such joy-provoking wit, the embarrassment of the once worshipping Lord Condereley when Fanny calls him "darling" in front of his prim young wife'.⁵¹ Fanny invites herself to visit her former admirer Jim Conderley, now elderly, and meets his wife Audrey, who is still young. Fanny helps Audrey over her social awkwardness in her own confident style: 'she stretched across the sandwiches and took one – nice not to have to bother about offering things, thought Audrey'. And later "Do read it aloud," said Fanny, lighting a cigarette – nice, thought Audrey, not to have to bother about suggesting things' (p. 74). Audrey, young and nervous, is happy to have her position as hostess undermined by Fanny's confident informality. Yet Fanny's informal style, as Audrey grows to realise, while Fanny does not, demonstrates Fanny's assumption of power in their interaction. As Katherine Ayer observes, von Arnim 'frequently represents conversation as a means of control'.⁵²

Fanny's manners, previously delightful, now appear frivolous, jolting and incongruous. When Fanny telephones Perry, one of her old lovers, he thinks, 'years since anyone had called him darling, and it seemed to him simply grotesque' (p. 163). The Conderleys do not say 'darling'. Audrey, 'though she was pleased when Fanny said darling, she was uncomfortable as well, for ought someone who was really quite a stranger to use such a strong word?' (p. 85). Then Fanny begins to call Jim 'darling': 'she was calling him darling now, just as she used to, so natural had she become' (p. 91). The use of the word 'natural' in this context is an example of Fanny's ready intimacy, her confidence, and an example of her dated manners. To be 'natural' appears to mean to revert to the manners one is most comfortable with, and ironically is also the word Audrey chooses to explain her objection to Fanny's manners. She repeatedly argues that her objection to Fanny calling Jim 'darling' is natural. "I'm sorry if I seem rude," she finished up with a defiance that contradicted her words, "but I'm sure it's quite natural, and I know mother would think so too." (p. 96) As

⁵¹ 'Elizabeth at Her Best', *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 January 1940, p. 43.

⁵² Katherine E. Ayer, 'Elizabeth von Arnim (Countess Mary Annette Beauchamp Russell)' *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol 197: Late-Victorian and Edwardian British Novelists: Second Series (Gale, 1999), p. 14.

in *Christopher and Columbus*, von Arnim mocks the notion that there are 'natural' good manners. The pressures of socialisation, particularly for women, are such that there is no such thing as 'natural' behaviour: instead there is the power struggle of manners.

When Fanny finally finds herself alone with Jim, she wants to talk about herself – to find out if he thinks her appearance has changed – but he is appalled by her looks and avoids the subject:

“You’ll be talking about Hitler next.”

“And why not? He is rather terrifyingly important at this moment.”

Fanny sighed. “Oh, my dear Jim – the European situation. Even you,” she said. “All right. Go on, then.” And she too wished Audrey would come back. (p. 78)

Fanny may wish to talk about herself, rather than Hitler, but this choice is not so reprehensible. Fanny’s changed appearance is at the forefront of Jim’s mind too, and the ‘European situation’ is in comparison a safe topic to avoid more pressing social embarrassment. The political climate stalks hand-in-hand with Job through the text. They are emblematic, to Fanny, of the absolute end, yet von Arnim, with her deep sense of irony will use the ‘European situation’ to bring Job back to her, and with him her salvation. Job, it turns out, will also bring the European situation *to* her. He escapes torture in Vienna, and returns to London a broken man, and is persuaded by Fanny’s brother George that Fanny will look after him.

At first, Fanny refuses to see Job, purely because she doesn’t want him to see what she now looks like. However, the loss of her looks, which has been for Fanny the consuming tragedy of her life, is now replaced by a real tragedy. With the realization of Job’s suffering, and that he is blind, Fanny resolves to look after him. Her servant Manby is ‘suddenly aglow with pride; her lady was going to do the right thing, and she was more beautiful to Manby at that moment than she had ever been in the days of her glory’ (pp. 232-3). This is of course sentimental, but von Arnim also leaves us with the suspicion that Fanny’s motivations are still rooted in self-interest: Job gives her the viable role in life that she has been searching for, and will never see that she is no longer beautiful. Katherine Ayer perceptively observes that the metaphor of blindness structures the novel: preoccupied

with her appearance, 'Fanny is blind to the increasingly threatening political situation. Her husband, though physically blinded, recognises both the horrors of the emerging Third Reich and the worth of Fanny's commitment to him at the novel's close'.⁵³

Job's torture at the hands of the Nazis is presented as unsayable:

"Not the - ?"

But terror came into the room, into the quiet, safe, Charles Street room, at the bare approach of the word she was going to say if he hadn't stopped her. "Hush, hush –" he whispered in quick panic (p. 230)

To bring this 'terror' into Fanny's comedy of manners is an extraordinary ending. In *Christopher and Columbus*, while political realities drive the comedic narrative, romantic form is maintained, and the novel ends with marriages, albeit ironic and subversive ones. In *Mr Skeffington* the 'terror' enters the drawing room, rather than existing as a framing context. It seems appropriate that Fanny cannot even say the word 'Nazi': does the word have a place in a comedy of manners?

Most reviews for *Mr Skeffington* do not mention the dénouement. Of those that do, the *Times Literary Supplement* is complimentary, noting, 'there is a sudden change of Elizabeth's delicious lightness to something poignant and almost tear-provoking in its tenderness'.⁵⁴ Kate O'Brien, a fellow middlebrow novelist, was the only reviewer to directly question von Arnim's ending, and the combination of romantic comedy and Nazi torture made her uneasy.

Is it the weather, or is it the European situation, which, as Fanny herself says, always did have something the matter with it? Or why does one feel a little embarrassed all of a sudden before "Elizabeth's" sweet artificiality? [...] "Elizabeth" has chosen to give that end a twist which I do not think legitimate. I do not think it is good manners in light comedy to make your heroine's curtain out of someone else's off-stage and too convenient tragedy. Altogether somehow I felt a bit queasy over *Mr Skeffington*.⁵⁵

⁵³ Katherine E. Ayer, p. 14.

⁵⁴ 'Elizabeth at Her Best', *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 January 1940, p. 43.

⁵⁵ Kate O'Brien, 'Fiction', *The Spectator*, 2 February 1940.

Von Arnim began writing *Mr Skeffington* in 1936; she intended a cheerful ending in which Fanny realises the pleasures and compensations of growing older, but found she was unable to write this happy conclusion.

It had become increasingly impossible for Elizabeth to avert her eyes – as she had first hoped to do – from the sinister menace personified in Hitler. The cheerful, confident words about Fanny’s future froze into lies as he looked over her shoulder. They could not have the least reality with him about.⁵⁶

Finally, in 1939 after many struggles, she rewrote the last two chapters and made the necessary alterations to the rest of the novel. These circumstances explain the instability of the novel: at first it appears to be business as usual for von Arnim in her sharp, Austenian focus on typical von Arnim themes of manners and aging, then the figure of Job and the ‘European situation’ push more and more insistently into the foreground. Fanny’s manners are comprehensively dissected and critiqued: in calling everyone ‘darling’ Fanny behaves as she did in her glory days in the 1910s and 20s; now, in 1936 it seems the voice of a vanished world of frivolity. There is, perhaps, an ironic awareness on von Arnim’s part that she, like Fanny, is a novelist out of her time. As the novel progresses the reader is persuaded, as von Arnim was, that a peaceful happy ending for Fanny is untenable. The account from her journal suggests that the ending that Kate O’Brien saw as illegitimate came out of von Arnim’s determination to find a legitimate ending. To her, to stay with a stylistically usual ending was impossible.

Having said this, to end a novel with a blinded man being reunited with the woman he loves is not to deviate from the romance; on the contrary, *Mr Skeffington* immediately recalls *Jane Eyre* (1847). This intertextual borrowing is not new to von Arnim; as I discuss in the next chapter on *Vera* (1921), von Arnim frequently makes creative use of nineteenth century ‘classics’, particularly the Brontës’ novels, in her fiction. However, the fact that these events are recognisable from *Jane Eyre* does not ease their passage for the reader. This is not one of *Jane Eyre*’s finer moments. As Sally Minogue argues, although Charlotte Brontë often challenges the conventions of her genre, in her need to reconcile Jane and Mr Rochester she is ‘forced back on to standard, even hackneyed, devices of the nineteenth-

⁵⁶ de Charms, p. 363.

century novel to extricate her heroine from a cul-de-sac'.⁵⁷ Contemporary readers of Brontë may have been a little disappointed by this, but for contemporary readers of *Mr Skeffington*, I would argue, the ending is also jolting because it is not funny. This tragic device seems to belong in *Jane Eyre*'s tragic romance, rather than in *Mr Skeffington*'s comedic romance.

Finally, after consistently addressing serious issues through the comedic form over a period of forty years, including World War I in *Christopher and Columbus*, it seems von Arnim has come to something she cannot laugh at. Why do the Nazis and World War II disrupt von Arnim's novel in a way that World War I did not? As Fanny observes, 'ever since she could remember there had always been something the matter with [the European situation], and it hadn't in the slightest way interfered with amusing, silly things being whispered in one's ear' (p. 10). Is it simply age? In *Mr Skeffington* enjoyment of the freedoms and camaraderie of war work is presented as the preserve of the young. Fanny remembers World War I: 'In those days she was too busy being beautiful ever to think. Life rushed her along at breathless speed from one excitement to another, the War, and her work during it in France, being the greatest excitement of them all' (p. 81). However, von Arnim was not young in 1914, she was a middle-aged woman of 48. Perhaps in 1939 then, at the age of 73, she simply felt unable to face the horror *again*. She wrote of *Mr Skeffington*: 'the book I am writing isn't gay as to subject - what subject now is gay? - but it is gaily written. Uphill work though. My vitality has slowed down and I pant where I used to run'.⁵⁸ Her daughter Liebet suggests that it was the persecution of the Jews and the rise of the Nazis that she found most upsetting, combined with the casual anti-Semitism common in Britain at this time.⁵⁹ Von Arnim's previous technique of expressing political opinions through a charming comedic form had caused these dimensions to be overlooked; in *Mr Skeffington* the unfunny ending, I would suggest, allowed the political dimensions to be recognized. The *New York Times* reviewer wrote: 'at last we are suddenly at grips with the special conditions of the world today'.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Sally Minogue, Introduction to Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Ware, Wordsworth Editions, 1999), p. vii-viii.

⁵⁸ de Charms, p. 384.

⁵⁹ de Charms, p. 393.

⁶⁰ *New York Times*, 17 April 1940, quoted in Ayer, p. 14.

Many influential studies of women and war take as their canonical text Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*, and work with the assumption that all wars are wrong and that they destroy women's culture.⁶¹ However, World War I did not destroy von Arnim's method of cultural production: the comedic form she developed in the early years of the twentieth century was successfully utilised in her 1919 novel *Christopher and Columbus* to produce a charming comedy centring on the displacement of people and anti-German feeling. It was instead World War II that fundamentally challenged her mode. Phyllis Lassner argues that during World War II many women who had protested against World War I 'changed their minds as they recognised that the uniquely horrific consequences of Nazi policies differed from the self-deceiving aims, purposeless losses, and uneasy peace that had justified their denunciation of "the war to end all wars"'.⁶² However, Lassner stresses that there was no unified voice, instead 'sometimes wildly divergent responses',⁶³ and indeed von Arnim was not a writer who overtly denounced World War I, but she did find the Nazis 'uniquely horrific'. Von Arnim's difficulties do seem characteristic of the period; as Nicola Beauman observes, many women in the 1930s 'were still trying to come to terms with the devastating after-effects of the first World War upon their lives. The pessimistic self-awareness that runs throughout the work of so many writers [of the inter-war period] was an oblique expression of their sense of loss; and when another war loomed, many ceased to write'.⁶⁴

If von Arnim had lived, she might have developed a new mode for the 1940s. As it is, *Mr Skeffington* seems an appropriate elegy for von Arnim's novels. As Katherine Ayer observes, '*Mr Skeffington* represents a farewell to the Edwardian and post-World War I society that was celebrated and skewered in Arnim's previous novels'.⁶⁵ This is not, of course, the end for the feminine middlebrow novel. Although frequently regarded as an inter-war phenomena, the feminine middlebrow form, as discussed in Chapter 1, did persist into the 1940s, 50s and 60s. The specifically comedic feminine middlebrow novel also continued. Von Arnim's struggles indicate that a rather different comedic mode was needed

⁶¹ See for example Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *No Man's Land* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986-94), Margaret Higgonnet, Sonya Michel, et al., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

⁶² Lassner, p. 4.

⁶³ Lassner, p. 4.

⁶⁴ Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1983), p. 231.

⁶⁵ Ayer, p. 14.

for World War II, and I find this in the novels of Elizabeth Taylor. Taylor has received far more critical attention than von Arnim, and can be regarded, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, as a paradigmatic feminine middlebrow novelist, yet her use of comedy is rarely discussed. This may be in part because her comedy is decidedly understated in comparison to von Arnim. There is something about the exuberance of von Arnim that seems to belong to the Edwardian period and the 1920s; Taylor offers a more austere comedy in her 'response' to war.

Elizabeth Taylor's *At Mrs Lippincote's* (1945)

At Mrs Lippincote's is Taylor's first published novel, but she had been writing for many years before publication. On her last day at school she wrote in her diary:

Everyone knows what they are going to do, except me. This evening I tried to read some of *Alcestis*, but it wasn't the same. I feel as if my life is over, and I don't know what to do. Perhaps someone will marry me. In the meantime I have started another novel.⁶⁶

It is a startlingly melancholy diary entry. It also communicates, with characteristic economy, the feelings of loneliness and dislocation that become recurring themes in Taylor's work. The tone is immediately recognisable. This is a clear-eyed, unsentimental sadness – 'perhaps someone will marry me' - that believes that one has to carry on, and try one's best in a lonely and difficult world. Taylor's way of doing this is to continue to write novels. *Alcestis*, a Greek drama by Euripides, is notable for its ambiguity of tone and the critical debate over its genre; it can be considered the first tragi-comedy. She writes that it no longer has the effect it once had, its power diminished in the prosaic anxiety and disappointment of finishing school. This experience may have influenced the development of her own writing, in which she consistently avoids high drama or outright comedy,

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Taylor's diary, quoted in Robert Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy* (London: Peter Owen Publishers, 1986), p. 36. This book, based on the correspondence between Taylor and her friend Liddell, was the main source of information about Taylor's life and career until Nicola Beauman's biography was published in 2009. Most of her letters were destroyed, as she wished, depriving us of what Liddell describes as their 'private jokes, "pretty severe philippics" against some living authors and critics, and – out of her own surroundings – the introduction of some wonderful "flat" characters whose utterance could never fail to delight' (Liddell, p. 32). Liddell suggests that Taylor spared them immortality out of 'charity', but then gives another, less noble, motivation by recounting how 'we both detested Katherine Mansfield and her whining, coarse letters, and we were aware that our private jokes and Ivyisms would look no better' (Liddell, p. 33).

preferring instead to delineate the small, unnoticed tragedies of domestic lives with irony and wit. The comedic approach Taylor adopts is subtly different from that of von Arnim; the 'High Comedy' and occasional farce of the interwar period is gone, to be replaced by something smaller in scale. What continues is a deep and persistent sense of irony and a use of humour that demands and creates a peculiarly close engagement from a community of readers.

This first published novel is set during World War II. Julia and her seven-year-old son Oliver have moved from London into a rented house - Mrs Lippincote's house - to join husband Roddy at his RAF posting. Roddy's cousin, Eleanor, has also lived with them since the beginning of the war. The elderly Mrs Lippincote has been displaced to the nearby Saint Winifred's View Hotel. Thus the novel is named, like *Mr Skeffington*, for an absent character whose influence is still continuously felt.

Of Taylor's 12 novels, *At Mrs Lippincote's* has received by far the most critical attention. Jenny Hartley and Phyllis Lassner utilise the novel to support their theses on women writers' responses to World War II, yet *Mrs Lippincote's* does not offer a 'response' to war comparable to the tragic disruptions of *Mr Skeffington*. Instead *At Mrs Lippincote's* establishes Taylor's rather disingenuous preference for 'books in which practically nothing ever happens'.⁶⁷ There is little 'action' in the traditional sense: Taylor's focus is everyday domestic life, and everyday relationships. However, 'we must rid ourselves of the delusion that it is major events which most determine a person. He is more deeply and lastingly influenced by the tiny catastrophes of which everyday existence is made up'.⁶⁸ This observation, made about workers in Weimar Germany, might also be Taylor's credo, and that of many middlebrow novelists of this period. Major events are here not the most significant influence on a person, and Julia's 'delightfulness' is not crushed by the monolithic 'event' of the war. The war has become a backdrop to the eternal 'tiny catastrophes of everyday life' which are Taylor's concern.

⁶⁷ Elizabeth Taylor, *The New York Herald Tribune*, 11 October 1953.

⁶⁸ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*, trans. Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 1998), p. 62. Quoted in Joe Moran, *Queuing for Beginners* (London: Profile Books, 2008), p. 60.

In the winter of 1943-4 Taylor had decided to stop pursuing a political angle in her writing. In a private letter she wrote: '[I] moan for the wasted years & delusions I had. What utter cock it all was. And so unnecessary, for we had only to look around us to see what literature is. What it does not do is reflect contemporary history [...] Only private life there, how this & that person lived.'⁶⁹ Taylor does not, as Phyllis Lassner argues, use 'her own wartime experiences to give her first novel a critical edge'.⁷⁰ To suggest the war is necessary to give an 'edge' is to misunderstand Taylor's philosophy and the focus of her novels. Indeed, to suggest this is to perpetuate the critical prejudices of the 1920s that Virginia Woolf summarised as 'This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room'.⁷¹ Although Lassner's is a recuperative project, the terms of her assessment suggest that the critical climate that undervalued feminine fiction because of its focus on middle-class women's lives still exists today.

In *At Mrs Lippincote's*, the war is mundane; it does not encroach and loom, and suddenly disrupt, as it does in *Mr Skeffington*; it is integral to life. However, Taylor's and von Arnim's responses to World War II have in common an approach which Gill Plain identifies in many women's writing of the period. Unlike during World War I, there is less overt 'war writing', Plain suggests, and more 'wartime writing'. Elizabeth Bowen, one of Taylor's favourite writers, wrote an insightful preface to the American edition of her short-story collection *The Demon Lover*:

These are all wartime, none of them war, stories. There are no accounts of war action, even as I knew it - for instance, air raids [...] These are, more, studies of climate, war-climate, and of the strange growths it raised. I see war (or should I say feel war?) more as a territory than as a page of history; of its impersonal active historic side I have, I find, not written.⁷²

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Taylor, letter to Ray Russell, 30 September 1943, quoted in Nicola Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor* (London: Persephone Books, 2009), p. 126.

⁷⁰ Phyllis Lassner, *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of their Own* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1997), p. 172.

⁷¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929; London: Penguin, 1993), p. 67.

⁷² Elizabeth Bowen, preface to *The Demon Lover* (1950), p. 48, quoted in Plain, p. 3.

For Taylor and von Arnim, as Plain suggests for many women writers, 'their preoccupation was less with the outward destruction of war, than with a more introspective contemplation of the human condition under war'.⁷³

War does not dominate conversations in *At Mrs Lippincote's* as it did in the 1930s *Mr Skeffington*, or in 1919's *Christopher and Columbus*. As is often the case with something pervasive and omnipresent, in *At Mrs Lippincote's* the war is rarely discussed. In one of the few instances when it is, Julia is interrupted swatting flies in her kitchen by Mr Maffick, a visiting curate. She tells him:

"This morning I read in the paper about something vile the Nazis did, and I thought: 'It's all right. It's not as bad as the atrocity I read about last week.' I was very much shocked at myself."

"War does that for one."

"Yes. That's what I said. The contemplation of brutality brutalises. Last time, you didn't get your tea. This time you shall have it." (pp. 174-5)

The war has clearly been going on for a long time. Having expressed shock and noted brutality without sounding in the least shocked, Julia addresses herself to the more pressing matter of providing a visitor with tea. What John Mair noted of von Arnim: 'a pleasing gift for the near epigram'⁷⁴ is also true of Taylor, except here the skilful, economical phrase 'the contemplation of brutality brutalises' has the weariness of aphorism. In *Mr Skeffington* the Nazis had the shock of the new, and could not be mentioned by name. Here they are sandwiched bathetically between fly-swatting and making tea. This under-statement, or frequently, non-statement, is indicative of the new austerity of the 1940s.

However, in a rare appearance for Elizabeth Taylor in an academic journal, this scene inspired Ernest Boll to make a connection between *At Mrs Lippincote's* and the 18th century *Tristram Shandy*.⁷⁵ Julia's approach to fly-swatting revives 'memories of Sterne as it invents a modern rendering of his theme of human power exercising compassion toward the

⁷³ Plain, p. 3.

⁷⁴ John Mair, *The New Statesman and Nation*, 27 January 1940.

⁷⁵ Ernest Boll, 'At Mrs Lippincote's and Tristram Shandy', *Modern Language Notes*, 65: 2 (Feb 1950), pp. 119-121.

weak, intrusive house fly'.⁷⁶ Mr Maffick asks Julia why she didn't hit an easy target of two flies together. She answers, "I never hit them when they're copulating. It would simply be the limit. Would *you* like that?" she asked with a show of innocence' (p. 173). While Boll notes the scene's 'drolly expressed Shandean mock-sentiment' he argues that Taylor 'advances beyond Sterne in achieving the truly humanitarian spirit, a serious understanding of the universal impulse that is inherent in the strong, to be cruel to the weak, whether house fly or human being'.⁷⁷ For the scene continues with Mr Maffick suggesting fly-papers, to Julia's distaste:

"They're so cruel. Imagine it! Striving to free oneself until the legs leave the sockets. This way is bad enough. Contemplating brutality makes you used to it. [...] It is the first step towards committing atrocities on human beings." (p. 173)

However, Julia's awareness that 'experience with cruelty [...] callouses sensitivity to human suffering'⁷⁸ does not mean that she is an exemplar of the humanitarian spirit, only that she understands how human cruelty works. The conversation continues with her comment that reading about a Nazi atrocity had only inspired her to think that it was 'not as bad as the atrocity I read about last week' (p. 174): she knows *why* she is cruel, but that does not stop her being so. Taylor shows a more acute understanding of human nature than Boll credits her with; she portrays a character who is kind, charming, funny, sensitive, and yet simultaneously cruel. This, she unsentimentally suggests, is the way people are.

One of the few other direct mentions of the horrors of war again addresses the barriers to adequate expression. In a small step outside convention, Julia goes for a walk in the evening and meets Mr Taylor, who works in a seedy bar in the town. Before he was bombed out he was the manager in Julia and Roddy's favourite restaurant in Soho.

'Bombed out' is a phrase the world was now used to. "But you were lucky," people would say, "not to have been sleeping there." "No, no one was hurt," he would say. It was like a game of tennis, that sort of conversation: the ball went back and forth but no one was really involved, the expected replies were dealt and after the game

⁷⁶ Boll, p. 120. It also suggests *King Lear*: 'As flies to wanton boys, are we to th'Gods; They kills us for their sport.' William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (1608; London: Routledge, 1990), iv. 1. 36-7.

⁷⁷ Boll, p. 120.

⁷⁸ Boll, p. 120.

had been kept up for a while, the other side tired and, feeling it had done well, changed the subject. But the truth had not been spoken. Had he suddenly said: "My life ended just the same, whether I was killed or not. This that I have now means nothing to me and has no value," they would still not have understood. (97)

As the war has continued over years, the phrase 'bombed out' no longer carries emotion and meaning. The conventional conversation is a dance to which each knows the steps and can make the required moves on 'autopilot', without the bombed person expressing their experience, or the responder understanding. 'The truth had not been spoken': the idea that conventional manners are a barrier to communication, and, further, are antithetical to the expression of genuine feeling is not raised by Taylor only in relation to the war. Ironically, given that both authors' novels are often read as 'conventional', a critique of conventionality recurs time and time again in Taylor's novels. Both von Arnim (as *Mr Skeffington* and *Christopher and Columbus* demonstrate) and Taylor are concerned with the way that manners can exercise power, and, as an expression of conventional social mores, be cruel. Taylor's particular focus is on isolation. As well as active cruelty, Taylor finds barriers, omissions and misunderstandings in (non) communication, and subsequent loneliness.

At Mrs Lippincote's is a novel filled with intertextual references. As I noted in my analysis of *Christopher and Columbus*, Humble argues that the middlebrow novel typically makes a 'claim to the highbrow by assuming an easy familiarity with its key texts and attitudes'.⁷⁹ Knowledge of certain novels also denotes character and forms bonds: Julia has a kind of flirtation with her husband Roddy's boss, the Wing Commander, through their shared knowledge and love for the Brontës' novels. Half mockingly, half romantically, she calls him 'Mr Rochester'. Roddy, in contrast, demonstrates his lack of understanding through his inadequate reading, remarking, when Julia mentions Catherine Morland "I never knew her" (p. 79).⁸⁰ While drawing characters, these references also define the reader: there is the assumption that the reader will also pick up the references, and Humble argues 'such

⁷⁹ Humble, p. 29.

⁸⁰ Humble, p. 51-52.

knowledge and interest in fact *defines* a certain sort of woman: middle-class, intellectually curious, intimately engaged with her reading'.⁸¹

Whilst I agree with Humble that these intertextual references function to draw characters and to define readers, I am not convinced that they demonstrate a 'claim to the highbrow'. As Humble herself describes, there was an explosion of interest in the Brontës and their novels in the interwar period: they were a 'contemporary obsession',⁸² not minority, avant-garde cultural products. In her introduction Humble describes the 'stylistic and thematic blue-prints' of the middlebrow novel as being 'little different from the conventions that dominated the mainstream novel throughout the nineteenth century (we need only think of Austen and the Brontës, Trollope and Charlotte M. Yonge)'.⁸³ In referencing these novels, I would argue that the middlebrow novelist is claiming them as her antecedents, not as aspirational signifiers. It is also important to remember that while the Brontë's novel were popular, they were not in the least conventional; when they were published they were considered to be extremely shocking.⁸⁴ In making a claim to these novels as antecedents I would argue that middlebrow novelist is not so much staking a claim to establishment 'mainstream' literature, as linking herself with unsettling and distinctively feminine literature. Florence Leclercq, for example, suggests that *At Mrs Lippincote's* shares with the Brontës' novels a 'particular concern with the concept of disintegration'.⁸⁵ That the Brontë novels can now be considered cosy and safe is an oddity mirrored in the view of middlebrow novelists such as Taylor and von Arnim as conservative and unchallenging. The continuity between the 19th century and the interwar writers does not end with World War II. As Niamh Baker observes of the period 1945-60, 'women writers now had a tradition behind them of their foremothers who had found ways of expressing subversive ideas and of depicting a true reality, either consciously or semi-consciously, while

⁸¹ Humble, p. 178.

⁸² Humble, p. 176. 'The Brontë Museum at the Haworth Parsonage opened in the 1920s, and photographs of the opening, displayed in the museum today, show a massive crowd more reminiscent of a political rally than a cultural event.'

⁸³ Humble, p. 11.

⁸⁴ See, for example, Patsy Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights* (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996).

⁸⁵ Florence Leclercq, *Elizabeth Taylor* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), p. 15.

appearing to write with circumspection and decorum'.⁸⁶ The mode that both von Arnim and Taylor develop to do this is comedic.

You would not know, reading the criticism of *At Mrs Lippincote's* by Humble, Lassner and Hartley, that it is a deeply funny novel. The use of comedy does not form a part of their analysis of this novel, nor of any of the World War II writing considered. Plain is the only critic who notes the use of comedy in women's writing of the period, suggesting that many 'contemplate the destruction around them with an ironic eye and a keen sense of the absurd', but this point is not developed.⁸⁷ Lassner had addressed comic novels in her 1994 chapter "'Between the Gaps": Sex, Class and Anarchy in the British Comic Novel of World War II'.⁸⁸ It seems odd that she did not return to these observations in her wider-ranging monograph of 1997, but it is perhaps significant that her chapter analysed outright 'comic novels' (Evelyn Waugh's *Put Out More Flags* [1942], Marghanita Laski's *Love on the Supertax* [1944] and Beryl Bainbridge's *Young Adolf* [1978]), rather than those, like *At Mrs Lippincote's* that use comedy, rather than belonging in a traditional sense to the comic genre. Lassner chooses not to consider comedy in *British Women Writers of World War II*, and does not apply her analysis that comic forms work to 'interrogate those ideologies which may have united and propelled Britain to victory, but whose rhetorics also reified social divisions' to other novels.⁸⁹ Even Neil Reeve's recent book-length study of Taylor, published with the stated aim of highlighting Taylor's 'ruthless wit' says little on the subject of comedy.⁹⁰ Humble includes 'comic narrative' in her list of genres encompassed by the middlebrow novel,⁹¹ but does not explicitly discuss the form or significance of comedy, despite using comedic texts to illustrate middlebrow themes. Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) is used particularly frequently for its references to the Brontës and Austen, markers that 'define' a certain kind of reader. The novel specialises in an

⁸⁶ Niamh Baker, *Happily Ever After? Women's Fiction in Postwar Britain 1945-60* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989), p. 21.

⁸⁷ Plain, p. 5.

⁸⁸ Phyllis Lassner, "'Between the Gaps": Sex, Class and Anarchy in the British Comic Novel of World War II' in *Look Who's Laughing: Gender and Comedy*, ed. Gail Finney (Langhorne, Pennsylvania: Gordon and Breach, 1994).

⁸⁹ Lassner, *Between the Gaps*, p. 206.

⁹⁰ Reeve, N. H., *Elizabeth Taylor* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2008), back cover.

⁹¹ Humble, p. 12.

intertextual comedy; it is satirical in its take on rural novels and the pretensions of the Lawrence-like Mr Mybug, yet the significance of this comedic technique is not considered.

I would argue that Elizabeth Taylor's use of the comedic form is crucial to an understanding of both her achievements as a novelist, and her reception as 'middlebrow'. *At Mrs Lippincote's* utilises a knowing intertextual comedy: combined together, intertextuality and comedy form a particularly powerful stylistic technique that builds a close community of readers who read the novel in a certain way. For example, let us consider again the scene where Roddy says that he 'never knew' Catherine Morland. This is a joke at Roddy's expense: as Freud comments, 'tendentious jokes are especially favoured in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority'.⁹² A joke is thus a highly suitable technique for a woman in a patriarchal society to use to criticise a husband. However the joke that Roddy 'never knew' Catherine Morland does not merely hide the criticism of a husband in the trappings of a joke; the joy of this intertextual joke is that he never knows that there *is* a joke, and that he is being laughed at. If, as Freud posits, 'laughing at the same jokes is evidence of far-reaching psychical conformity'⁹³ and intertextual references define a reader through a knowledge and appreciation of particular texts, the intertextual joke is doubly powerful in building a community of readers. The intertextual joke builds a particularly *close* relationship with the reader. If the network of intertextual references has already defined a reader 'intimately engaged with her reading', the joke pulls her closer still. Roddy's remark that he never knew Catherine Morland doubly damns him in the mind of the middlebrow reader because it is funny. In laughing the middlebrow reader is demonstrating much more than the knowledge to understand the joke, which after all, is knowledge very widely shared; she is demonstrating a shared attitude.

The intertextual references alone, therefore, are not sufficient to 'define' a reader in this dynamic way; comedy differentiates this intensely involved female reader from the many 'ordinary' readers. As Flora in *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) observes:

⁹² Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (Harmondsworth: Penguin: 1976), p. 147.

⁹³ Freud, p. 203-4.

one of the disadvantages of almost universal education was the fact that all kinds of persons acquired a familiarity with one's favourite writers. It gave one a curious feeling; it was like seeing a drunken stranger wrapped in one's dressing-gown.
(p. 105)

Given this rude familiarity during the 1930s, comedy is as important as the other factors identified by Humble in building a distinct community of readers. The comedic middlebrow novel addresses a female, middle-class reader who perceives the jokes, the irony, and the serious subject matter of these techniques and performs the work necessary to find these novels funny, ironic and serious. The comedy thus speaks to the attentive middlebrow reader in ways that appear to elude those critics who would dismiss the novels as limited or trivial.

Julia is an immensely funny character, playful, charming and eccentric, but she does not become an anachronism like Fanny. In *Mr Skeffington* the war is an encroaching shadow threatening the continuation of Fanny's identity. The 'adorable', frivolous lady of leisure is an embarrassing anachronism in the anxious mid-1930s, and von Arnim's novel posits that Fanny must change, and the novel must change. Taylor's protagonist, Julia, in contrast could still be described (in common with von Arnim's earlier heroines, and as Fanny pointedly no longer is) as 'delightful' and by Humble as 'fey' and 'frivolous'⁹⁴. Julia differs from Fanny in that she finds strength in her supposed frivolity.

The telephone rang. Roddy would not be home until late.

"Well, then," said Eleanor, coming downstairs and striving to show she had forgiven Julia. "We can manage with some cheese."

"Why? Why? How did this notion get round that women cook only for men? Why, indeed, should we manage with some cheese, just because our-- our sexual organs are different?" Julia stormed.

Eleanor sat down on the bottom step and giggled weakly. One way and another, the day had been too much for her. When he heard his mother joining in, Oliver paused in his teeth brushing and listened. He loved to hear Julia's long, loud, rippling laughter.

"Sexual organs' sounded grand," Eleanor wept, "you are getting to be quite a lady."

Julia went happily to the kitchen. They managed with some cheese.

⁹⁴ Humble, p. 48.

(p. 58)

From the beginning of the novel, Julia has known that her husband Roddy is having an affair (unlike the reader, who will not become aware of this until the end of the novel). Julia storms because she suspects that Roddy will be seeing the other woman; but then she laughs: 'long, loud, rippling laughter'. For Julia humour is an assertion of the ego, as Freud theorised: she refuses to be compelled to suffer. Her humour 'signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstances'.⁹⁵ This passage also demonstrates Freud's notion of the 'grandeur' of humour,⁹⁶ as Julia tries to elevate them from the petty conventions of living – but it is this elevation that makes Eleanor giggle, and they do manage, bathetically, with some cheese. However, humour has still performed its assertion of pleasure, and they manage happily. This is not to say that Julia's repeated use of humour and willingness to laugh denies or prevents her suffering. Instead, I would argue that Taylor's understanding of humour is that it is created out of suffering, and that to make the reader laugh with Julia does not negate the reader's understanding of her pain. Taylor's skill as a writer means that these scenes can be read coherently without knowing that Julia is concealing the fact of Roddy's affair, and then become richer in significance and suffering when considered retrospectively, or on re-reading the novel.

Julia is also concealing her grief for her dead daughter. She mentions her only once, to the Wing Commander:

"My daughter's birth was so benign, only tiring in the exhilarating way that it is tiring to climb a hill to see a great stretch of country [...]"

"But what happened to the child?"

"Oh, the child was dead in no time," she said in a shocking, light voice.

(p. 147)

⁹⁵ Sigmund Freud, 'Humour' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 21 (1927-31), ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961), p. 163.

⁹⁶ Freud, 'Humour', p. 162.

As Jenny Hartley notes, 'some doors must be kept locked; lightness and reticence hold the barricade in place'.⁹⁷

Roddy finds Julia's behaviour baffling and problematic. Julia, like Fanny and the twins Anna-Rose and Anna-Felicitas, repeatedly fails to think or behave in the required conventional manner. Ranged against her are her husband Roddy and cousin Eleanor, both of whom are wholly committed to the necessity of conforming to the rules, as they see them, of social life. Roddy is very annoyed to find that Julia has been out in the evening alone:

She exasperated him. Society necessarily has a great many little rules, especially relating to the behaviour of women. One accepted them and life ran smoothly and without embarrassment, or as far as that is possible where there are two sexes. Without the little rules, everything became queer and unsafe. When he had married Julia, he had thought her woefully ignorant of the world; had looked forward, indeed, to assisting in her development. But she had been grown up all the time; or, at least, she had not changed. The root of the trouble was not ignorance at all, but the refusal to accept. (p. 105)⁹⁸

Julia's infraction was small: she went out alone in the evening. However, this is not an acceptable feminine innocence but a conscious refusal that is much more challenging to the status quo. This is subtly different from von Arnim's novels. Her characters do not refuse to engage in society's manners: the twins in *Christopher and Columbus*, Catherine in *Love*, and Fanny in *Mr Skeffington* are all wrong-footed, or wrong-foot others by being *unable* to get manners 'right'. They are too 'natural' or too old-fashioned in their manners, and struggle to adapt to the new, or in the case of the twins never understand the need to change. Roddy is right in his conclusion that Julia is driven by refusal rather than ignorance. As with her use of humour, Julia's 'refusal to accept' is part of her continued assertion of her sense of self, and her refusal to be compelled to suffer. However, as is typical of a Taylor novel, there is no decisive break with conventional society; instead her tiny rebellions accumulate in the tensions of her marriage. One might expect the war to be

⁹⁷ Jenny Hartley, *Millions Like Us*, (London: Virago, 1997), p. 137.

⁹⁸ Roddy's view of women has much in common with von Arnim's 1898 creation, 'The Man of Wrath', who asks, 'what is there, candidly, to distinguish you from children? You are older, but not wiser, - really not so wise, for with years you lose the common sense you had as children'. Elizabeth von Arnim, *Elizabeth and her German Garden* (1898; London: Virago, 1985), p. 144.

a force for conventionality and social cohesion, but in this novel, as in *Christopher and Columbus*, not 'fitting in' is presented as a good thing. Julia's refusal to behave in accordance with conventional manners is part of Julia's appeal to the reader, and her 'delightfulness'.

Julia muses on the way that dead bodies are removed from houses before they can decompose: "A place for everything," [even the dead Mr Lippincote] she thought, and giggled.' (p. 5) The domestic phrase, meant for the tidy and well-ordered home, becomes darkly comic when applied to corpses and indicates Julia's irreverent and potentially subversive attitude to domestic life. This playfulness is a continual irritation to Roddy, and in a sense, rightly so. Freud argues that jokes are an attempt to recreate the childhood pleasure in play that has been brought to an end by an adult 'critical faculty or reasonableness'.⁹⁹ What Roddy sees as wrong with Julia is exactly a lack of 'reasonableness'. But this is not to say that Julia does not feel the suppression of reasonableness; she feels the full weight of these forces that Freud saw as psychological, and I would argue are rooted in gendered socialisation. If, as Freud theorises, the '*yield of pleasure corresponds to the psychological expenditure that is saved*' [Freud's italics],¹⁰⁰ suppression is necessary to experience the pleasure of jokes: Julia's pleasure in playful jokes is predicated on the pressure she is under to behave in a certain way. Perhaps, as a woman in a society where notions of acceptable 'femininity' are strictly prescribed, Julia is under particular psychological pressures that engender pleasure in release.

Julia's playfulness, therefore, is informed by an adult consciousness, in contrast to that of the twins in *Christopher and Columbus*. In that novel, it was the reader who brought the inhibition to the interaction, and a distance was maintained between comic character and reader. Here the reader is in an empathetic relationship with Julia, as we share her inhibition and subsequent pleasure. This is demonstrated in her relationship with the Wing Commander; in this scene he has called on Julia at home, and is taken upstairs to see her son Oliver, who is in bed with measles:

"Dear, it is Mr Rochester to see you."

⁹⁹ Freud, p. 178.

¹⁰⁰ Freud, p. 167.

A faint flush went up Oliver's cheeks.

"I will talk to your son while you get tea," said the Wing Commander. "Just a cup. Nothing to eat." In his inmost mind, he had thoughts which delighted him and would continue to do so when they recurred in the future. "Roddy'd have a fit," he told himself. (p. 49)

If Julia and the Wing Commander were play-acting simply for Oliver's benefit this would not be subversive; it would simply be an indulgence for a sick child. But here the adults are finding their own pleasure in Julia's playfulness. For an officer's wife to name the taciturn and powerful Wing Commander 'Mr Rochester' is subversive; it is intimate and creates a bond of shared understanding between them. Roddy would indeed have a fit.

While Julia is an appealing heroine, she is portrayed as flawed, and these flaws are not always charming. Taylor is unflinchingly strict in her observations: she describes how Julia 'never set out of an evening without feeling lifted, [...] nerves ready for some great event which had never happened, but of which she would not despair for another ten years at least', a pitiable state, which Taylor notes coolly (p. 72). Taylor continues:

What it was she hoped for she had not asked herself, yet she did realise dimly that only among other people might she find what she sought, some other person whose words would link together with hers, with whom, she now thought, leaning forward to colour her lips imperfectly, some chord might be struck. (p. 72)

What she hopes for is that same sense of connection that Taylor creates between novel and reader; that sense of a shared attitude and understanding. Julia finds this connection only with the Wing Commander through their shared appreciation of the Brontës. Yet despite the Brontës carrying so much significance in this novel, Taylor acknowledges that they are also a source of romantic delusion:

There would be raw material enough to weave dreams, for many an hour washing up, ironing or shelling peas, those times when the body divides, one part set down firmly before the sink, but the mind all the time tacking, veering, going forward at a fair pace in no particular direction, not quite so much like Emily Brontë learning German grammar while she kneaded bread as Julia liked to suppose. (p. 99)

Taylor sees that Julia's coping mechanisms do not always have the 'grandeur' of humour; sometimes she is finding sanctuary in comforting fantasy.

Taylor sees that the consequence of playfulness can also be cruelty. Julia asks of Eleanor:

“Have you been to tea with your young man?” Her very way of saying ‘your young man’ implied that he was not, and was not likely to be, anything of the kind. She always dealt too lightly and therefore cruelly with Eleanor’s personal life. (p. 56)

Yet while Taylor points out the injustice of how Julia treats Eleanor, her depiction of Eleanor is a scathing portrait of a single, middle-aged woman, so biting and acute that it could be considered cruel. (It is certainly far nastier than Austen’s satirical depiction of the spinster Miss Bates in *Emma*.) In the opening scene Julia bursts into exhausted tears and runs from the room. Eleanor says to Roddy

with satisfaction, “I thought it was only spinsters who behaved in that neurotic way.” She was forty and unmarried, she had a little money in Imperial Tobacco, a royal-blue evening dress, and was in love with her cousin, for whom, as they say, she would have laid down her life with every satisfaction. (p. 14)

This passage demonstrates the knowing sophistication of Taylor’s writing and the corresponding sophistication it requires from the reader. We are given a list of signifiers we are expected to be able to decode. They are clichés, used self consciously as a damning summary that is also a conclusion, signifying that nothing else need be said. With our understanding, we are being invited to share in the joke at Eleanor’s expense. An added cruelty is the juxtaposition of this summary with Eleanor’s awareness of the stereotypes associated with a woman in her position, and her pride in not conforming to them. ‘She tried not to behave like a spinster in a book. Her sense of humour saved her, she believed.’ (p. 20) Taylor’s insertion ‘she believed’ implies it most definitely does not save her. Ironically, while Eleanor shares with Taylor and the reader an understanding of all the signifiers of the spinster that Taylor uses to laugh at her, without the shared attitude of humour (the ‘psychical conformity’) she cannot see that she is the joke.

This shared attitude or ‘psychical conformity’ in Freud’s terms, is crucial to understanding Taylor and von Arnim’s highly coded novels. As Harding argued of Austen, it is possible for these novels to be happily misread by readers who do not see the critical or cruel

aspects of their work. However, Taylor and von Arnim's technique has developed from Austen; it cannot be said, as Harding said of Austen, that their challenges exist in 'scattered points' or the 'faintest change of tone'.¹⁰¹ There is instead a continual play of irony and persistent use of comedy. To understand Austen fully, Harding suggest only that an 'attentive reader' is required; in this thesis I argue that the reader needs to be more than merely 'attentive'.¹⁰²

To appreciate irony as much is required from the reader as in Freud's notion of 'psychical accord' in jokes. As I detailed in Chapter 1, Wayne Booth argues that 'reconstructing' irony is an 'astonishing communal achievement. [...] the whole thing cannot work at all unless both parties to the exchange have confidence that they are moving together in identical patterns'.¹⁰³ In common with Freud's theory of jokes, he argues that the act of interpreting irony must be 'performed': 'the act of reconstruction [his term for reading irony] and all that it entails about the author and his picture of the reader becomes an inseparable part of what is said, and thus that act cannot really be *said*, it must be *performed*'.¹⁰⁴ Given the level of engagement required, therefore, it is ironic that irony is frequently regarded as a technique that introduces distance and detachment. Gill Plain, for example, finds a strategy of detachment in the work of some women writers of World War II in their contemplation of 'the destruction around them with an ironic eye and a keen sense of the absurd'.¹⁰⁵ I understand that 'detachment' in this context is meant to apply to the perspective of the author to the subject matter, rather than the relationship between author and reader, yet the engagement required to 'reconstruct' irony leads me to question how detached the author is when *constructing* it. Taylor, for example, may regard the character of Julia with a coolly ironic eye, yet there is little sense of detachment; instead there is the impression that Taylor can regard her ironically because she understands her so minutely (Nicola Beauman suggests that Julia is based on Taylor herself¹⁰⁶). In *Christopher and Columbus* von Arnim's tone as she details the travails of the twins is archly ironic, but she does not give the impression of detachment as she renders the events absurd. Instead she communicates

¹⁰¹ Harding, p. 6, 9.

¹⁰² Harding, p. 10.

¹⁰³ Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 13.

¹⁰⁴ Booth, p. 39.

¹⁰⁵ Plain, p. 5.

¹⁰⁶ Beauman, p. 126.

her intense feeling; her dislike of the 'virtuous', and profound sense of the arbitrary cruelty meted out in the name of 'patriotism'.

These are the stylistic choices that von Arnim and Taylor have made: both have decided that a novel can be profound in this form, and can communicate intimately with the reader. Yet, as Nicola Beauman observes, most of the reviewers failed to realise what a funny novel *At Mrs Lippincote's* is.¹⁰⁷ Equally disappointingly, N. H. Reeve, one of the few academics publishing on Taylor today, mentions the comedy just once in his discussion of the novel, to observe that 'even the comic scenes are really demonstrations of the differences between the rigid and flexible in the face of new challenges'.¹⁰⁸ His 'even' expresses surprise that a comic scene could have any point beyond simply amusing, and this from a study whose stated aim is to 'highlight the ruthless wit with which she assaulted all forms of egotism and self satisfaction'.¹⁰⁹ John Brannigan, in his analysis of *Mrs Lippincote's*, is uncertain when faced with possible irony. He quotes this passage to illustrate the narrator's view that Julia is culpable for her unhappy home life:

Could she have taken for granted a few of those generalisations invented by men and largely acquiesced in by women (that women live by their hearts, men by their heads, that love is women's whole existence, and especially that sons should respect their fathers), she would have eased her own life and other people's. She did not – probably never would now – realise that generalisations are merely conveniences, an attempt to oil the wheels of such civilisation as we have. (p. 26)

I read this passage as clearly ironic, and part of the critique of patriarchal oppression that Brannigan argues exists in the novel. Brannigan, however, is more tentative, noting that 'the narrative tone here is borrowed from Austen, and, like Austen in places, too, there is a certain indeterminacy in how we should read the narrative perspective'. The ironic interpretation – that Taylor is ventriloquising Roddy's views to draw attention to the societal constructs against which Julia will always fail – is presented by Brannigan as only one possible meaning.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Beauman, p. 155.

¹⁰⁸ Reeve, p. 29.

¹⁰⁹ Reeve, back cover.

¹¹⁰ John Brannigan, 'No Home of One's Own: Elizabeth Taylor's *At Mrs Lippincote's*', in *Women's Writing 1945-60: After the Deluge*, ed. by Jane Dowson (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 81-2.

For a first novel, *At Mrs Lippincote's* was very widely reviewed, and the reviewers included such august figures as L. P. Hartley, George Orwell and Elizabeth Bowen. The reviews varied, yet there is a sense from them of the specificity of understanding demanded from the novel, and particularly from its humour. Rose Feld described the novel as a 'charming comedy of manners'; James Agate in the *Daily Express* wrote 'Now this is my cup of tea. I chortled from the first page to the last'.¹¹¹ The *John O'London's Weekly* reviewer perceptively wrote:

Nothing much happens. It is all in the telling, the nuances, the odd moments. And how sensitively and with a balanced sophistication Mrs Taylor collects those moments and displays them on the little velvet pad of her humour. A philistine will wonder what it is all about...¹¹²

While both comment on the specificity of reader response their terms are interestingly different: Agate uses the intimate, colloquial and domestic 'cup of tea', while the *John O'London's Weekly* draws a distinction between the appropriately sophisticated reader and the 'philistine': the uneducated and unenlightened person who lacks the necessary connoisseurship. It is indicative of the confused status of Elizabeth Taylor's novels; on the one hand this is a book 'for the epicure',¹¹³ positively defined against a mass, middlebrow readership, on the other it is domestic, cosy and amusing and thus middlebrow. George Orwell, on the other hand, considered the novel

a waste of talent [...] It was written with real distinction, and the author gives the impression of feeling very strongly about something or other, but just what are the meaning and purpose of the book it would be hard to say. [...] Probably this book means something, but the meaning fails to get through.¹¹⁴

Orwell clearly senses that there is *something* going on in this novel, but is unable to say what. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given his characteristically masculine perspective, Orwell lacks that psychical accord necessary to 'reconstruct' the irony and participate in the intimate communication of the novel.

¹¹¹ Rose Feld, *Weekly Book Review*, 28 April 1946, p. 6; Agate quoted in Beauman, p. 154.

¹¹² *John O'London's Weekly*, 5 October 1945, p. 13.

¹¹³ L. P. Hartley, *The Sketch*, 17 October 1945, p. 218.

¹¹⁴ George Orwell, 'Talent Gone to Waste', *Manchester Evening News*, 11 October 1945, p. 2

Similarly, von Arnim's *Christopher and Columbus* attracted both complimentary reviews that understood her humour as a technique for conveying her critical views, while others saw it merely as 'summer reading'. The *New Republic* reviewer thought it shamelessly written for a mass readership: 'it is obviously written to be a best-seller. The ambition sticks out all over it. The highest praise that can be given 'Christopher and Columbus' is that nothing has ever been better written for the class of fiction sometimes denoted by the publishers as summer reading.'¹¹⁵ The *Nation* was even more scathing in its contempt for what it saw as pandering to the masses: 'Christopher and Columbus is so plainly an obliging concession to what the public is presumed to want - in other words, a pot-boiler - that it needs little criticism here. Put yourself in the place of this public, and there's your book.'¹¹⁶ Von Arnim commits the crime of being too popular. Already, in 1919, before the term 'middlebrow' enters the lexicon, it is clear that to be popular is to lack cultural distinction, and this makes a text unworthy of critical consideration. These reviews also demonstrate how it is possible for this text to be read in a variety of ways: von Arnim's subversive attacks on notions of nationality and patriotism are entirely missed.

The political and critical elements of *Mr Skeffington*, I have suggested, were recognised because von Arnim's comedic form broke down. The close understanding and 'psychical accord' needed to decode her comedy and irony were no longer required, and more simply, without comedy a text is more likely to be read as 'serious'. However, until *Mr Skeffington*, von Arnim's most critically acclaimed novel was *Vera* (1921), a work which did successfully and innovatively synthesise comedy and tragedy. *Vera*, with Taylor's *Palladian* (1946), is considered in the next chapter. As well as continuing the analysis of comedy, this next chapter will examine closely these novelists' use of intertextuality, demonstrating how complex and challenging the use of these 'middlebrow' modes can be. These novels are also increasingly self-reflexive, as von Arnim, and particularly Taylor, question the uses of fiction.

¹¹⁵ *New Republic*, 24 May 1919.

¹¹⁶ *Nation*, 19 April 1919.

Chapter 3

“One begins to see what is meant by ‘they lived happily ever after’.”¹ Elizabeth von Arnim’s *Vera* (1921) and Elizabeth Taylor’s *Palladian* (1946)

The opening scenarios of *Vera* and *Palladian* are strikingly similar: both begin with the death of a father (the mother having died some years before), leaving an orphaned young heroine isolated and vulnerable as she sets out into adult life. That this adult life will involve marriage is presented as inevitable, and in this sense both novels follow the structure of a traditional romance.

Both orphaned young heroines meet an older man with a mysterious first wife, immediately recalling Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). In revisiting the Brontë novel von Arnim and Taylor were part of a wave of interest among interwar women writers. Patsy Stoneman identifies *Vera* as ‘the first link in a chain of *Jane Eyre* derivatives including *Rebecca* (1938) and Elizabeth Taylor’s *Palladian* (1946)’.² However, neither *Vera* nor *Palladian* is a simple rehearsal of the Victorian narrative; both have a darker purpose. *Jane Eyre* ends with the joyful marriage, while *Vera* is concerned with ‘what is meant by “they lived happily ever after”’. Von Arnim takes the fairy tale, and the 19th century narratives that built on this traditional romance plot, and asks, what happens after the marriage? *Palladian* similarly explores the imperatives of the *Jane Eyre* narrative, creating a complex, self-conscious reflection on the consequences of reading this ‘classic fiction’. *Palladian* will end with the marriage, but in neither of these novels will the heroine live ‘happily every after’.

Elizabeth von Arnim’s *Vera*: horror and hysteria in the drawing room

Elizabeth von Arnim’s eleventh novel, *Vera*, was a startling experiment in form. Her previous novels, whilst addressing such serious topics as the miserable tyranny of

¹ Elizabeth Taylor, *Palladian* (1946; London: Virago, 1985), p. 190.

² Patsy Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights* (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), p. 94. In her account of the interwar period Stoneman also considers Elizabeth Jenkins’s *Harriet* (1934), Helen Jerome’s play *Jane Eyre* (1936), Rosamond Lehmann’s *The Weather in the Streets* (1936) and Winifred Holtby’s *South Riding* (1936).

relentless child-rearing (*The Pastor's Wife* [1914]) and the displacement of people by war (*Christopher and Columbus* [1919]) had skilfully utilised the romantic structures and witty tone typical of the middlebrow novel. With *Vera* she continued this form, but with a striking new element: horror. In her review for the *New Statesman* Rebecca West perceptively commented:

The author has produced a remarkable novel because she has had the courage to override a tiresome literary convention. She has insisted that there is no real reason why a book should not be just as tragic as it is comic. By the unsentimental justice of its values, by its refusal to make Wemyss less of a comedian because he is murderous or less of a murderer because he is comic, *Vera* achieves a peculiar, poignant effect. It is without any question the most successful attempt at the macabre in English.³

In *Vera* the twenty-two-year-old Lucy is standing at her garden wall, waiting for the body of her father to be attended to, when the middle-aged Everard Wemyss walks by. Wemyss is lonely and desperate for distraction, as public opinion has decreed that he should withdraw from society for a few days following the death of his wife, Vera. According to Wemyss, Vera fell from the first-floor sitting-room window onto the flag stones beneath (in front of the library where Wemyss was writing letters), but the inquest, rather than confirming misadventure, has recorded an open verdict. From the beginning the reader is given the unpleasant suspicion that Vera may have *thrown* herself out of the window, and that Wemyss may have had something to do with it.

Everard and Lucy comfort each other: "Aren't we like two children," he said, his voice, like hers, deepened by feeling, "two scared, unhappy children, clinging to each other alone in the dark?"⁴ Both characters are repeatedly referred to as children; Wemyss appears to be simple and harmless, while Lucy is vulnerable and needy. She has 'the relieved eyes of a child who has been left alone in the dark and sees its mother coming with a candle. Vera usedn't to look like that' (p. 21). Wemyss is very happy to find a

³ Rebecca West, *New Statesman*, 15 October 1921.

⁴ Elizabeth von Arnim, *Vera* (1921; London: Virago, 1988), p. 24. Subsequent references will be in parenthesis in the text.

woman who conforms to his view that women are inherently childlike and a proposal of marriage quickly follows.⁵

Part of the creeping, mounting horror of *Vera* is in watching Lucy steadily, cumulatively being subsumed by Wemyss.⁶ A large part of his courtship is spent stopping her talking:

“Everard’s own little love,” he said, kissing and kissing her. “Everard’s own good little love.”

“Yes, but – ” began Lucy faintly. She was, however, so much muffled and engulfed that her voice didn’t get through.

“Now wasn’t I right?” he said triumphantly, holding her tight. (p. 80)

Wemyss stops every word of dissent with kisses, and engulfs her in embraces that suffocate her objections. He seems intent on colonising her entirely, body and mind. The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer took fulsome exception to this aspect of the novel:

If indeed it were possible that a girl who had been brought up by and entirely devoted to a man of fine sensibilities could have succeeded at that moment – or at any moment – to the slimy blandishments of a Wemyss, we could only feel that she deserved what she eventually got; and this annihilation of Lucy as an object of sympathy diminishes the dramatic value of the story. She functions thenceforth as merely the instrument by which Wemyss’s character, in all its egoism, coarseness, and vulgar sensuality, is laboriously exposed.⁷

The logic of this reviewer’s assertion that being ‘devoted to a man of fine sensibilities’ (her father) could prevent a girl falling for the ‘slimy blandishments of a Wemyss’ is specious. Could it not be that Lucy’s habitual devotion to a masculine authority figure, is precisely that which leads to her marriage to Wemyss? Rebecca West also saw the young and innocent Lucy as a flaw in *Vera*, though contrary to the *TLS* reviewer, she

⁵ An earlier version of this analysis of *Vera* appeared in my Master’s dissertation: ‘The Reassurance of Cruelty: The Novels of Jane Austen, Elizabeth von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor’ (unpublished master’s dissertation, Roehampton University, 2004), p. 17.

⁶ Lucy is being subsumed within Everard, as we presume he attempted to subsume Vera. The name ‘Vera’ is literally contained within ‘Everard’. Von Arnim is such a clever, knowing writer this is unlikely to be a coincidence. The name Wemyss is similarly significant: Wemyss Ware is a brand of pottery, first produced in 1882, particularly known for its pigs. Their naïve charms were out of fashion in the 1920s, but would have been well-known to *Vera*’s readers. See ‘The History of Wemyss Ware’, <www.wemyssware.co.uk> [accessed 9 December 2010].

⁷ ‘Elizabeth von Arnim: *Vera*’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 September 1921.

found Lucy too *easily* believable: 'there is just the least suspicion of insincerity in her choice of such an obvious heroine to play the part, instead of the not less genuinely sympathetic type of woman who might, for the sake of companionship or home, have attempted to tolerate bawling fatuity'.⁸ I agree that Lucy is not the bravest choice of heroine; a more realistic, and more socially significant choice would have been the woman who entered the marriage pragmatically, as an acceptable course in a society with limited options for middle-class women.⁹

However, most shocking and difficult to believe is the real relationship that inspired the novel. Von Arnim was not young and naïve when she succumbed to the 'slimy blandishments' of Earl Francis Russell, whom she married in 1916. She was middle-aged, a successful and wealthy novelist who had spent her career dissecting the relationship between the sexes. Russell himself was entirely convinced that the novel was based upon their relationship; he apparently stormed about his club brandishing the book, demanding to know if people thought it was him, and threatened to sue.¹⁰ Karen Usborne claims that a female friend of Russell telephoned von Arnim to remonstrate with her, saying 'he can't have been that bad!', to which Elizabeth replied, 'he was worse!'.¹¹

Lucy is not 'merely the instrument' with which to expose Wemyss; she serves to expose the way that women collude in the tyranny of men. In this, the young and naïve Lucy still enables von Arnim to discuss the psychologically fascinating choices that she herself made.¹² Katherine Mansfield wrote: 'though it may be "drivel" in cold blood, it is incredible the follies and foolishness we can bear if we think we are in love. Not that I

⁸ Rebecca West, *New Statesman*, 15 October 1921.

⁹ These limited choices are unflinchingly explored in some other feminine middlebrow novels of the period, notably Winifred Holtby's *The Crowded Street* (1924) and F. M. Mayor's *The Rector's Daughter* (1924). Both these novels explore the attitudes of self-effacement that are so pervasive among women at this time, and the cruel realities of remaining single; both are tragic, poignant, and not at all funny.

¹⁰ Karen Usborne, 'Elizabeth', *The Author of Elizabeth and her German Garden* (London: The Bodley Head, 1986), p. 235.

¹¹ From a conversation with Alexander Stuart Frere, quoted in Usborne, p. 233.

¹² Katie Roiphe, in her study *Uncommon Arrangements: Seven Portraits of Married Life in London Literary Circles 1910-1939* (New York: The Dial Press, 2007) finds a deep conflict towards equality, even among 'New Women': 'the allure of the dominating male, the fantasy of surrendering themselves to a stronger male personality, had not entirely faded with their enlightened ideals. Instead there was a deep, almost erotic appeal in the act of subjugation. Even formidable feminists like Rebecca West and Elizabeth von Arnim, who devoted a great deal of thought to the power relations between men and women, were enraptured and nearly defeated by traditional, almost brutal displays of male power'. p. 17.

can stand the Wemyss “brand”. No. But I can perfectly comprehend Lucy standing it’.¹³ Lucy allows Wemyss to take control, at first because she is grieving for her father, but then her choice becomes more reprehensible. We are repeatedly told how restful Lucy finds Wemyss:

She had never met any one so comfortable to lean on mentally. [...] Such perfect rest, listening to his talk. No thinking needed. Things according to him were either so, or so. With her father things had never been either so, or so; and one had had to frown, and concentrate, and make efforts to follow and understand his distinctions, his infinitely numerous, delicate, difficult distinctions. (p. 64)

Von Arnim’s wit has two, connected targets in mind here. One is Lucy, and possibly, by extension herself. Her analysis is that tyranny can look most attractively restful; your thinking is done for you. The more independence you have, the more choices: how to live, what work to do, who to vote for? The responsibility for decision-making introduces pressure and anxiety that the control of patriarchy removes. As Glen Cavaliero puts it, *Vera* exposes the ‘reciprocal attraction between masculine arrogance and female self distrust’.¹⁴

Von Arnim consciously links this target with modernism: Lucy’s clever, modernist father (who left her only worthless books in his house in Bloomsbury, in common with the heroine of *Palladian*, whose father had 2,000 books) and his ‘infinitely numerous, delicate, difficult distinctions’. Modern life for Lucy is like modernism, difficult and ambiguous, and so she joins Wemyss in a world of tyrannous certainty. However, while Lucy’s father encouraged her to think, it is not to think for herself; it is to follow his arguments – thus her father is exposed as another controlling patriarch, and modernism as perhaps a masculine movement. There is also the inference that these are the *wrong* books for Lucy. In contrast to *Palladian*, which will find the consequence of reading the 19th century gothic romance to be delusion, *Vera* suggests that if Lucy had read more of this type of novel - *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* would be particularly salutary – she would not have sleep-walked into her marriage with Wemyss.

¹³ Katherine Mansfield, *Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. by Vincent O’Sullivan and Margaret Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1984), p. 346.

¹⁴ Glen Cavaliero, *The Alchemy of Laughter: Comedy in English Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 77.

Von Arnim gives us a classic drawing room scene for the meeting of Lucy's father's clever friends and Everard the Victorian patriarch:

[Wemyss] was sure he was behaving beautifully and with the easiest unconcern, but the mere way he looked at her and stood over her was enough. Also there was the way she looked at him. The intelligences in that room were used to drawing more complicated inferences than this. They were outraged by its obviousness. (p. 99)

As well as a satire on the moderns' outrage at being denied their right to infer subtexts and delineate difficult distinctions, this is a knowing satirical nod to Jane Austen. For a readership familiar with Austen's drawing room scenes of subtle communication and misunderstandings through silences and overheard conversations, this scene is an outrage indeed, and the bathos is comic. This is typical of both von Arnim and Taylor; they assume their reader is highly attuned to these intertextual references, allowing them to exploit the comic potential of playing with generic convention. Austen, of course, is already ironically comedic, so Von Arnim is thus offering a drawing room scene which satirises a satire.

Before her marriage to Wemyss, Lucy lives with her aunt, Miss Entwhistle. There is no room for the large maleness of Wemyss in Miss Entwhistle's narrow, spinster house: she imagines having to pass him as he fills her narrow stairs, fearing the approach of his 'triumphant trousers' (p. 83). He disrupts Miss Entwhistle's ordered middle-class drawing room to the extent that she spends his visits riding aimlessly around London on the omnibuses:

She couldn't bear the thought of being cramped up so near Mr Wemyss's – no, Everard's; she had better get used to that at once – love-making. His way of courting wouldn't be, - she searched about in her uneasy mind for a word, and found vegetarian. (pp. 83-84)

Miss Entwhistle is the most perceptive character in *Vera*; already she is beginning to sense that Wemyss could eat Lucy alive. Yet this growing sense of the macabre is also comic, through that single, wholesome word 'vegetarian'. If she had thought that his way of courting would be 'carnivorous', the effect would be quite different: macabre, but not comic. The comedy in *Vera* frequently comes from the combination of suspense and mundane domestic detail. The chapter in which Lucy tries to conceal her

engagement to Wemyss ends: 'was it possible, thought Lucy, her eyes carefully on her toast and butter, that Aunt Dot suspected?' (p. 75). The very ordinariness of domestic life – the 'toast and butter' and unthreatening 'Aunt Dot' – serve to undercut the horror of what is happening, while at the same time increasing the sense of ludicrousness and mounting hysteria.

Despite some reviewers' objections to the innocent character of Lucy, I think a mature, pragmatic heroine as West suggests would have lessened the dark fairy-tale aspects of *Vera*. Lucy – who West calls 'fairy-hearted' – is a pure heroine, as white as newly-fallen snow; the princess in the tower. While remaining in the drawing room, this novel moves beyond the generically typical 'domestic realist' middlebrow novel to become a dark fairy-tale of good and evil, ghosts and monsters.¹⁵ The name Lucy – meaning 'light' – recalls Lucy Westenra of *Dracula* (1897), a girl of 'unequalled sweetness and purity' who is literally consumed by the vampire Dracula.¹⁶ In *Vera*, good girl Lucy is thus playing a standard role of doomed innocence; one illustrated by the chapter headings in the *Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1991). On the one hand there are 'Clever women, resourceful girls and desperate stratagems' and on the other 'Good girls and where it gets them'. The clear inference is that it does not get them anywhere good: as one of Taylor's characters in *Palladian* will observe, "It is like one of the fairy tales." To which another replies "But not a fairy tale in which I should want to be the heroine. [...]" One begins to see what is meant by 'they lived happily ever after'.¹⁷ *Vera* also shares with fairy tales the trope of repetition. The narrative moves slowly, building each instance of tyranny with a hypnotic, repetitive rhythm that gives the novel a dream-like, then nightmarish quality.

For the first 145 pages of the novel *Vera* has been waiting for us. 'Lucy fought and fought against it, but always at the back of her mind was the thought, not looked at, slunk away from, but nevertheless fixed, that there at the Willows, waiting for her, was Vera.' (p. 145) Everard continually compares Lucy to her, to comic effect: Lucy 'was the object of the passionate protectiveness he felt he was naturally filled with, but for

¹⁵ Patsy Stoneman argues that famous texts like *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* acquire a status rather like that of a fairytale, which might be described as mythological. *Brontë Transformations*, p. 7.

¹⁶ Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897; London: Penguin, 1993), p. 278.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Taylor, *Palladian* (1946; London: Virago, 1985), p. 190.

the exercise of which circumstances up to now had given him no scope. You couldn't passionately protect Vera. She was always in another room' (p. 117). We and Lucy have struggled to form a picture of Vera; like Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, she is in another room of the narrative, and Lucy fills the void with macabre imaginings.

The similarities with Daphne du Maurier's 1938 novel, *Rebecca*, are clear.¹⁸ As the apprehensive second Mrs de Winter approaches her new home she notes the threatening rhododendrons 'blood-red', 'slaughterous red'.¹⁹ Lucy, equally apprehensive, first sees Wemyss's house as 'a great splotch of vivid red in the landscape. "Like blood," said Lucy to herself' (p. 148). Yet in *Vera*, while the sense of menace builds as effectively as in *Rebecca*, so does the hysterical comedy. As they arrive Wemyss explains that the house is called The Willows, because a house "should always be named after whatever most insistently catches the eye." "Then oughtn't it to have been called The Cows?" asks Lucy (p. 146). In this ground-breaking novel, innocent Lucy functions to increase both the comedy and horror. Her straight-forward questions are comically disruptive and bathetic, and her vulnerability increases the horror of her situation and the magnitude of Wemyss.

Lucy is as nervous and gauche as the second Mrs de Winter, and like her, she is expected to sleep in the same bed, use the same sitting room, and keep to exactly the same routines as the first wife. To prevent any danger of Lucy forgetting the first Mrs Wemyss, a life-size photo of her is hung in the dining room, along with one of Mr Wemyss Senior, whose eyes, naturally, follow one about the room. Lucy, considering the portrait of Vera, muses,

Really for such purposes one ought to be just wrapped round in a shroud.
Fashion didn't touch shrouds; they always stayed the same. Besides, how

¹⁸ It could be argued that *Rebecca* is highly derivative of *Vera*. It uses (or perhaps copies) the device of naming the novel after a character who never appears in the flesh: the first wife. *Rebecca*, of course, also recalls *Jane Eyre*. Sally Beauman, in the introduction to the 2002 Virago edition of the novel, mistakenly argues that *Rebecca* is 'an early example of intertextuality – and that is rare in a 'popular' novel, certainly one this early'. (p. viii.) Diana Wallace compares *Rebecca* with *Vera* as two rewritings of *Jane Eyre*: she argues that in *Rebecca* the protagonist is empowered through conniving in 'the murder of the mother', while *Vera* affirms attachment to the 'mother'. *Sisters and Rivals in Women's Fiction 1914-1939* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 54-5.

¹⁹ Daphne Du Maurier, *Rebecca*, (1938; London: Virago, 2002), p. 72.

suitable, thought Lucy, gazing into her dead predecessor's eyes; one would only be taking time by the forelock... (p. 164)

As Lucy considers the inevitability of death, we fear the inevitability of her *premature* death. The plot of *Vera* is surprising, shocking, but also logical. In this it follows the classic plot of tragedy described by Aristotle as best designed to excite both pity and terror: 'emotions most likely to be stirred when things happen unexpectedly but because of each other'.²⁰ *Vera* also fulfils Aristotle's contention that tragedy should give an insight into the way we should expect things to happen; at its simplest the tragic plot will show that if you do this, or fail to do that, you can expect these consequences.²¹ Thus, if you marry the tyrannous Wemyss you can expect to be driven to suicide.

Everard has very particular routines. A gong, for example, must be beaten by the housemaid before meals:

"It is beaten for exactly two and a half minutes before every meal," he explained.

"Oh?" said Lucy. "Even when we're visibly collected?"

"She doesn't know that."

"But she saw us."

"But she doesn't know it officially."

"Oh," said Lucy.

"I had to make that rule," said Wemyss, arranging his knives and forks more accurately beside his plate, "because they would leave off beating it almost as soon as they'd begun, and then Vera was late and her excuse was that she hadn't heard. For a time after that I used to have it beaten all up the stairs right to the door of her sitting-room. Isn't it a fine gong?" (p. 156-7)

Everard's strictures are, to his mind, unfailingly logical and straightforward. He is simply responding to what he sees as the attempts by servants and women to defy and annoy him. These are the demands of a child enforced with the power of a patriarch, a patriarch moreover, who turns out to be very difficult to please.

When Lucy runs out of the house into the rain, unable to bear witnessing another scene of Wemyss bullying the housemaid, Wemyss locks her out. When she is finally allowed back in, soaked and cold, Lucy is in a state of disbelief: 'This couldn't be Everard. Who was this man – pitiless, cruel? Not Everard. Not her lover' (p. 188). Unlike the second

²⁰ Adrian Poole, *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 7.

²¹ Poole, p. 17.

Mrs de Winter, Lucy turns to the first wife in her misery – Vera is the only one who could have understood. ‘Vera would help her. Vera never was beaten.’ (p. 190. A sadly mistaken belief on Lucy’s part, given that we think Vera committed suicide.) However, Lucy’s encouraging awakening is short-lived. In five minutes ‘Lucy had passed from sheer bewildered misery to making excuses for Everard; in ten minutes she was seeing good reasons for what he had done; in fifteen she was blaming herself for most of what had happened’ (p. 193).

To understand Vera, Lucy turns to her books. ‘Suddenly she went to the bookshelves, and began pulling out the books quickly, hungrily, reading their names, turning over their pages in a kind of starving hurry to get to know, to get to understand, Vera...’ (p. 199) As Nicola Humble has observed, it is typical of the feminine middlebrow novel to use references to other novels, but von Arnim, like Taylor, is striking for her conscious discussions of the significance of reading. Her first ‘garden’ novels, *Elizabeth and her German Garden* (1898) and *The Solitary Summer* (1899) are built on the belief that what you read, how you read, and your relationship to books are of vital importance. In *Vera*, Miss Entwhistle muses ‘the books people read – was there ever anything more revealing?’ (p. 289): Wemyss’s books were chosen by Whiteley’s bookseller (“Macaulay, Dickens, Scott, Thackeray, British Poets, English Men Of Letters, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* – I think there’s about everything,” said Wemyss’ p. 175), and are kept in locked glass cabinets. Vera, in contrast, according to Wemyss, ‘hadn’t taken any care of her books [...]; she was always reading them’ (p. 210). Vera’s books include a worrying number of Baedeker travel guides and timetables, along with *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë’s collected poems and Thomas Hardy’s *Time’s Laughing Stocks*.

It is at this point that Lucy corrects the gap in her knowledge and begins reading Vera’s copy of *Wuthering Heights*. Wemyss ‘hadn’t read it, but he fancied he had heard of it as a morbid story’ (p. 210).²² In *Vera*, von Arnim brings the gothic into the domestic realist novel, as Brontë did with *Wuthering Heights*, and as Du Maurier will in *Rebecca*. But while *Vera* is as firmly rooted in the quotidian as these novels, von Arnim’s

²² Like many of the men in both von Arnim and Taylor’s novels, Wemyss has not read the books that are so important to the female characters, and to the imagined reader.

technique is subtly different: there the threat occurs *within* the everyday environment; here the threat is *from* the everyday. Lucy had feared the threat from Vera; from a ghost or supernatural terror. Instead the danger is from the simple, straight-forward, mundane and real Everard, whose control over the house and its female inhabitants is absolute. The character of Lucy recalls Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* (1818): there *are* dark undercurrents at work in *Northanger*, but Catherine mistakenly projects ‘Radcliffean paradigms of the Gothic villain’ onto General Tilney,²³ blinding her to the real threat of his prosaic expressions of patriarchal power and control. Lucy has believed the romantic script in which Wemyss is her protector: the revelation that he is a tyrant is so contrary to her sense of the world that she is unable to believe it. Patsy Stoneman argues that ‘Von Arnim’s novel, in fact, reverses the romance paradigm offered by the Brontë texts; the hero proves to be not the mirror but the enemy of the vulnerable heroine, and his house not a haven but a prison’.²⁴ Yet while Wemyss may be monstrous, he is not other-worldly; he is frightening because he is recognisable and because he is mundane. The smallness of the domestic scene does not diminish Wemyss; it serves to enlarge the impact of his tyranny. As Katherine Mansfield wrote to her friend, ‘have you ever known a Wemyss? Oh my dear, they are *very* plentiful! Few men are without a touch’.²⁵ While the insular domestic scene similarly enlarges Heathcliff’s tyranny, we would not, in contrast, be expected to have *known* a Heathcliff.

But it is the comedy that is combined with this intrusion of the macabre into the drawing room that makes *Vera* so special. A confrontation between Wemyss and Miss Entwhistle at The Willows forms the penultimate climax of the novel. Wemyss threatens to forbid Miss Entwhistle from seeing Lucy again, goading her into saying the unsayable – that she doesn’t think this wife will be able to last fifteen years. (By now, the conviction that Wemyss drove Vera to suicide is inescapable.) As Miss Entwhistle climbs the stairs, her meaning hits Wemyss:

“Come down. If you don’t come down at once I’ll fetch you.”

This, through all her wretchedness, through all her horror, for beating in her ears were two words over and over again, *Lucy; Vera – Lucy, Vera –* struck her as so

²³ David Blair, Introduction to Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1818; Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2000), p. xi.

²⁴ Stoneman, p. 93.

²⁵ *Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 346.

absurd, the vision of herself, more naturally nimble, going on up the stairs just out of Wemyss's reach, with him heavily pursuing her, till among the attic at the top he couldn't but run her to earth in a cistern, that she had great difficulty in not spilling over into a ridiculous, hysterical laugh. (p. 312)

Miss Entwhistle's experience mirrors that of the reader: we are reading now with a hand over our mouth to stifle a horrified, hysterical laugh. Wemyss has pursued us with his heavy tread inexorably through the narrative and now there is no doubt of what he is, and no where left to run. The very ordinariness of domestic life – the attic cisterns – juxtaposed with the horror of the situation induce hysterical laughter and simultaneously increase the magnitude of this tyrant. In the insular middle-class home he truly is master of all and there is no escape.

Wemyss proceeds to throw Miss Entwhistle out of his house.

"You will now leave my house," said Wemyss through his teeth.

"Without my hat, Everard?" she inquired mildly.

He didn't answer. He would gladly at that moment have killed her, for he thought he saw she was laughing at him. Not openly. Her face was serious and her voice polite; but he thought he saw she was laughing at him, and beyond anything that could happen to him he hated being defied. (p. 313)

Wemyss, constantly alert to any suggestion of defiance, has finally detected a subtext.

Like the twins in *Christopher and Columbus*, Wemyss may at first glance appear to fit with Henri Bergson's conception of comedy:

[Comedy] begins, in fact, with what might be called *a growing callousness to social life*. Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting in touch with the rest of his fellow-beings. It is the part of laughter to reprove his absentmindedness and wake him out of his dream.²⁶

Certainly Wemyss 'goes his own way without troubling himself about getting in touch with his fellow-beings', yet he is not 'callous to social life'. Wemyss is comic not through breaking free of social convention but through his absurdly absolute adherence to patriarchal convention. He is not absentminded in his behaviour, but totally sure of

²⁶ Henri Bergson, 'Laughter', in *Comedy*, ed. by Wylie Sypher (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), p. 147.

the rightness of his actions. In Bergson's view society 'breaks in' its members through laughter: it functions to humiliate and consequently correct individuals' social mistakes. However, to laugh at Wemyss is not conservative; it is instead to expose his adherence to convention as ludicrous and cruel. Comedy thus enhances rather than diminishes the power of von Arnim's portrait. Glen Cavaliero writes, 'The relentless way in which the author piles one instance of tyrannical behaviour upon another induces readerly hysteria as indignation struggles with collusive merriment.'²⁷ I argue that this is not a struggle: laughter is not necessarily collusive.

Everard recognises the power of laughter: to him laughter is defiance. He knows too, that politeness does not mean deference. Miss Entwhistle's apparently mild enquiry 'Without my hat, Everard?' allows her to remain within conventional feminine behaviour, while still clearly communicating her view that Wemyss is ludicrous. Her politeness thus enrages Wemyss further, as he knows he is being insulted (for once he is able to infer a sub-text), but is not given the justification to retaliate that he so desires. This passage encapsulates von Arnim's comedic technique: the feminine, domestic comedy of manners forms a barrier of apparent conventionality that allows her to express anger and defiance. This is Regina Barreca's 'handgun hidden in a handbag': the woman writer who 'obscures her most dangerous implements by making use of her most feminine attributes'.²⁸

Having thrown Miss Entwhistle out of the house, Wemyss goes to bed a self-satisfied man. The novel ends with Wemyss gathering Lucy into his embrace: "'Who's my very own baby?'" she heard him saying; and she woke up just enough sleepily to return his kiss' (p. 319). After what has happened and what we know, there could not be a more frightening ending. Tender Lucy is left in that most dangerous place, the marital bed with Wemyss. To end at this point leaves us wondering, how long will it take? What tortures will Wemyss subject her to? We want to urge Lucy to wake up – literally and mentally – jump out of the bed and run. Katherine Mansfield wrote to her friend: 'Wasn't the end extraordinarily good. It would have been so easy to miss it; she carried

²⁷ Cavaliero, p. 79.

²⁸ Regina Barreca, *Untamed and Unabashed: Essays on Women and Humor in British Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), p. 21.

it right through. I admired the end most, I think'.²⁹ Von Arnim not only takes us beyond the 'happy ending' to explore the consequences of this marriage, she leaves this comedy unresolved; a tactic that Judy Little argues is characteristic of feminist comedy. In her analysis, Bergson's theory is of *male* comedy: the comedy of women writers 'differs from rounded-off comic fiction in which the hero is ultimately reintegrated into society. The comedy [written by women] mocks the deepest possible norms'.³⁰

There were a small number of extremely appreciative reviews for *Vera*, seeing this as von Arnim's finest novel. W. McFee was in agreement with West and Mansfield on the character of Wemyss; s/he also identified the novel as distinctively feminine, and furthermore as a novel from a particular kind of woman:

Only a woman, only a married woman, only a married Englishwoman could have written it. It is a work of the highest art, and one instinctively recalls Jane Austen's masterly portraits. The superficial will call Everard Wemyss a caricature, which he most emphatically is not. All men have something of him in them.³¹

The majority, however, were disappointed by it. The *Spectator* reviewer, for example, wrote: '*Vera* is an uncomfortable and cruel book, and not all the art of "Elizabeth" can cause any part of it, except the first chapters, to be tolerable to the reader'; the *Freeman* described 'Elizabeth' as 'feminine-mean, critical, and tittering'.³² There is a sense that, with *Vera*, von Arnim had gone too far: her 'dangerous implements', as Barreca terms them, were no longer sufficiently obscured. Despite her persistent use of satire, ever since her first success with *Elizabeth and her German Garden* von Arnim's novels had been consistently regarded as 'delightful', and it seemed that many reviewers continued to expect a light read. They might enjoy a little gentle irony and satire to add piquancy to their enjoyment of her romantic comedies, but no more than that. These readers could be said to prefer, as Q. D. Leavis described the effect of the middlebrow novel, the 'agreeable sensation of having improved themselves without incurring fatigue'.³³ Thus, despite von Arnim's previous pushes at the boundaries of the delightful romantic

²⁹ *Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, p. 346.

³⁰ Judy Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark and Feminism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), p. 1.

³¹ W. McFee, *Literary Review*, 15 October 1921.

³² *The Spectator*, 15 October 1921; Stephen Graham, *Freeman*, 28 December 1921.

³³ Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, (London: Pimlico, 2000). p. 37.

comedy in *The Pastor's Wife* (1914) and other novels, this conjoining of what might be termed 'heavy' material with a 'light' tone in *Vera* disturbed many critics. Von Arnim, depressed by negative reviews, was greatly comforted by John Middleton Murray, who wrote: 'Of course, my dear, when the critics are faced with *Wuthering Heights* by Jane Austen, they don't know what to say'.³⁴

However, to the attuned reader, I would argue, the 'art of Elizabeth' does far more than make this novel 'tolerable to the reader'. Von Arnim achieves the supreme feat of making the horrific story of *Vera* delightful. Frank Swinnerton argues that our pleasure is her pleasure:

When we relish the defects of the hero of *Vera*, we are as it were hand in glove with the author, who, perceiving our enjoyment, will playfully decorate her accurate observation with newly invented absurdities of the most scathing [...] order. Thus the lucid ridicule of dullness and brutality which quickens nearly all her books was what produced for the hearer an awful delight in her more intimate conversation.³⁵

Thus, in *Vera* our delight in von Arnim's novels does continue, but has become awful. We read each accumulating instance of Wemyss's domestic tyranny with fascinated horror, yet continued pleasure. It is an extreme expression of Freud's understanding of jokes as a technique to express our repressed hostile urges. The pleasure in jokes is in overcoming suppression, and thus the most pleasurable jokes will be those that overcome the most suppressed thoughts and feelings. Freud argues that marriage is the most common target for hostile jokes, because 'there is no more personal claim than that for sexual freedom and at no point has civilization tried to exercise severer suppression than in the sphere of sexuality'.³⁶ The knowledge of the awful truth of Wemyss's murderousness has been repressed, both in societal norms that respect patriarchal authority, and symbolically in the novel's slow motion narrative, and the blindness of Lucy. If, as Freud argues, the 'yield of pleasure' in jokes 'corresponds to the psychical expenditure that is saved'³⁷ when the joke relieves us of the effort of

³⁴ Usborne, p. 231.

³⁵ Frank Swinnerton, *Figures in the Foreground: Literary Reminiscences 1917-1940* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1937, rev. 1963), p. 54.

³⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (Harmondsworth: Penguin: 1976), p. 155-6.

³⁷ Freud, p. 167.

maintaining our inhibitions, then laughing at Wemyss is delightful indeed. However, Freud's lifting of inhibition is only part of the pleasure of Wemyss; also crucial for the relationship between middlebrow reader and text is *recognition*. The pleasure of the joke for the attuned reader is in recognising Wemyss, as Katherine Mansfield clearly did, and further, the sense that others share this understanding that he is a monster.

The resistance to recognising *Vera* as both comedy and tragedy may be in part because the novel subverts the classical form of tragedy. Greek tragedy was crucially a special form, not of the everyday, while *Vera* is resolutely domestic. Neoclassical authors like Milton deplored the way modern authors put tragedy and comedy together, 'introducing trivial and vulgar persons' or as Sir Philip Sidney put it, 'mingling kings and clowns'.³⁸ This view of comedy and tragedy sees comedy as merely belittling - laughing at tragedy when it's not the real thing - or as comic relief, where the release of laughter helps to make the pain bearable.³⁹ Adrian Poole argues that this is not what the comic voice in tragedies is for. Instead 'they play a vital part in questioning the ambitions of those around them, their elevated language, their high ideals, their lofty sense of themselves'. Poole gives examples from *Romeo and Juliet* and *Henry IV* as 'comedy with an edge and laughter with a bite'.⁴⁰

This understanding of tragicomedy approaches the form of *Vera*, but is insufficient. In the tragicomedy, the comedy merely punctuates the tragedy: *Romeo and Juliet* and *Henry IV* are not known for their laughs. *Vera* is consistently as funny as it is tragic and macabre, and these elements are in balance, working in concert to produce a coherent effect. The novel may be regarded as a trail blazer in this respect. Using examples from the work of later twentieth century writers Fay Weldon and Margaret Atwood, Regina Barreca argues that 'often women's humour deals with those subjects traditionally reserved for tragedy: life and death, love and hate, connection and abandonment'.⁴¹ *Vera* anticipates Fay Weldon's *Female Friends* (1974): in this novel Chloe, like Lucy, has been taught to understand and forgive everyone, so 'cannot free herself from the tedious and perpetual tragedy of her life or escape her dependence upon her unloving

³⁸ Poole, p. 5.

³⁹ Poole, p. 74.

⁴⁰ Poole, p. 74.

⁴¹ Regina Barreca, *They Used to Call me Snow White... But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humour* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 31.

husband. At least, not until a moment when he is particularly petulant and she sees him clearly as a child spoiled beyond control: "Is she laughing at him?" the narrator asks. "She is. Her victory is complete".⁴² Barreca notes that the two experiences are simultaneous. 'It is not that Weldon's character has a flash of perspective and then decides to laugh. Her laughter and the brilliant flare of recognition feed each other in a delightful conflagration.'⁴³ Her laughter I would argue is also, crucially, an assertion of self. It has, as Freud suggested of humour, 'something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation'. This grandeur is in 'the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability'.⁴⁴ For Chloe, like Julia in *At Mrs Lippincote's*, her laughter is an assertion of the ego, as Freud theorised: she refuses to be compelled to suffer. In *Vera* it is the reader who experiences these effects of humour: through this 'delightful conflagration' we see clearly, and feel the assertion of von Arnim's narrative voice. Miss Entwhistle too, finds Wemyss ludicrous, and because of this knows how dangerous he is – unlike Lucy, whose inability to laugh at him leaves her tragically unable to maintain her sense of self or see Wemyss for what he really is.

Elizabeth Taylor's *Palladian* (1946): a copy of a copy

Like *Vera*, Elizabeth Taylor's *Palladian* (1946) disrupts the gothic romance narrative by being funny. This is, in itself, an unusual disruption of form, yet Taylor's mode and effect are very different. *Vera*, I would argue, transforms the gothic into a coherent tragi-comedy, while in *Palladian* these narratives are ultimately rejected.

'Palladian' is an architectural style derived from the work of Palladio (1508-80), who was himself influenced by classical architecture.⁴⁵ Its revival in Britain in the 18th century is thus a revival of a revival, and the buildings copies of copies. Taylor, as with

⁴² Barreca, p. 32.

⁴³ Barreca, p. 32.

⁴⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Humour', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 21 (1927-31), ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961), p. 162

⁴⁵ Michael Clarke, 'Palladian', in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms* <<http://www.oxfordreference.com>> [accessed 26 November 2009].

all her words, chose her title with care.⁴⁶ ‘Palladian’ signals Taylor’s intention to re-use the 19th century narratives of Jane Austen and the Brontës, themselves developments or satires on the early gothic novels of writers like Ann Radcliffe, and dissect their significance for her cast of characters.

Taylor’s use of intertextuality is multi-layered. The novel begins with the introduction of our ‘heroine’ Cassandra Dashwood, the name a double allusion to Jane Austen: ‘Dashwood’ from the sisters of *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), and ‘Cassandra’, the name of Austen’s sister. Her narrative is structured as a 19th century romance, borrowing specifically from *Jane Eyre* (1847): her orphaned heroine goes to work as a governess at a country house, for a widowed gentleman with a young daughter. After various travails, the novel ends with the marriage of governess and gentleman. However, unlike Jane, and unlike Lucy, Taylor’s characters are fully aware of the resonances of their lives with fiction. As with Catherine Morland in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1818), Cassandra’s actions and emotional responses are driven by her knowledge of novelistic conventions. The novel therefore requires a highly literate reader, who can be united with author and characters in appreciating the significance of novels and the act of reading.

This significance, however, is not straightforward. At first glance the novel’s invocation of these 19th century narratives could appear to be an exercise in nostalgic escapism; certainly the social context of 1946 is not explicitly visible: rationing, poverty and homelessness are notable by their absence. Florence Leclercq, in the first full-length study of Elizabeth Taylor, argues that *Palladian* ‘contrast[s] strikingly’ with *At Mrs Lippincote’s*. In common with those critics discussed in the previous chapter, who find a place for Taylor’s first novel in examinations of women writers’ responses to war, Leclercq considers *At Mrs Lippincote’s* ‘an attempt to come to terms with the grim reality of wartime England’, while ‘*Palladian* seems a prudent retreat into the past and an attempt to escape political and social pressures’.⁴⁷ To interpret *Palladian* as a ‘retreat’

⁴⁶ Nicola Beauman notes that when Taylor’s America publisher, Knopf, lobbied for the title of the novel to be changed to ‘Cassandra’s House’, ‘she angrily assumed they had not read the book’. Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor* (London: Persephone Books, 2009), p. 193.

⁴⁷ Florence Leclercq, *Elizabeth Taylor* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), p. 10. By contrast, when *Vera* was published in 1921, the novel was not criticised for failing to engage with World War One, indicating the particular focus on ‘social realism’ in the post-World War Two period.

or 'escape' is to get no further than Taylor's 'Palladian' romance novel façade. Leclercq is perhaps reading the novel simply as a 'country-house novel' - a recognizable generic category of the period which typically had an elegiac tone, 'tapping into a middle-class nostalgia for a largely fantasised aristocratic past'.⁴⁸

I would argue that *Palladian* is not nostalgic, and that its imagined world is a nightmare, rather than a comforting fantasy. Ironically, it is *At Mrs Lippincote's*, praised for its focus on 'grim realities' that is the more nostalgic text. As Leclercq herself discusses, Julia's deep fascination with the Edwardian photographs of Mrs Lippincote's family demonstrates her sense of a lost stability, the disintegration of the world around her, and her fears for the future.⁴⁹ However, in this context, nostalgia is read as a novelistically respectable attempt to deal with the impact of the war, rather than a retreat. In *Palladian*, the tropes of the Victorian grand narrative, with its country house and romance plot, are invoked not to evoke nostalgia, but to coolly, even cruelly, expose these fictions as sources of delusion.

The very first sentence of the novel ironically characterises Cassandra through the lens of fiction: 'Cassandra, with all her novel-reading, could be sure of experiencing the proper emotions, standing in her bedroom for the last time'.⁵⁰ Immediately, there is the ironic inference for the attentive reader (who has also read many novels, and knows what the proper emotions are) that 'proper' is ambiguous. These emotions may be 'proper' in the sense that they are correct in the world of a novel, but Taylor suggests that they may not be appropriate to the 'real life' of *this* novel, or to real life itself, and certainly block Cassandra's ability to experience her own, authentic emotions. Taylor appears to share Q. D. Leavis's view that 'a habit of fantasying will lead to maladjustment in actual life'.⁵¹ Throughout the novel Cassandra's wish that she could experience life through the behaviour and emotions she deems 'proper' through her novel-reading is thwarted by Taylor. In this opening scene, where Cassandra (like Lucy) leaves her childhood home after the death of her father, she is prevented from indulging in the 'proper' emotions by a woman coming to look over the house who is interested

⁴⁸ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 62.

⁴⁹ Leclercq, p. 14.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Taylor, *Palladian* (1946; London: Virago, 1985), p. 5. Subsequent references will be in parenthesis in the text.

⁵¹ Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932; London: Pimlico, 2000), p. 54.

only in the mundanities of coal deliveries and the kitchen range. (Fittingly, this new tenant intends to pull down immediately the shelves that held Cassandra's father's 2,000 books.) Cassandra leaves with 'not a moment for any of the thoughts I meant to have' (p. 8). At the school church service the next day she looks around 'hoping to experience nostalgia' and finds none, noting depressingly 'the opportunity for emotion comes when the emotion is dead' (p. 10-11).⁵²

A further irony in Taylor's refusal of Cassandra's desires is that Taylor is very *good* at nostalgia. She skilfully conveys the scene as Cassandra looks out of the window of her house:

She had knelt there on many evenings, watching the pattern of people in the street, the cyclists free-wheeling down the dip in the road, the tram-lines running with gold in the sunset (for do we not think of the summers of our lives?), and with every nerve responding to and recording for her ever after the sound of the shop-doors opening and shutting across the road (the continual *ping* of one door bell after another), the paper-boy yelling in the gutter, the trams like absurd and angry monsters roaring under the railway bridge. (p. 5)

The nostalgia Taylor will allow is not for the ways of life in country houses, or the idealised emotions of romance novels, but is in fact for life in an ordinary lower-middle home, in a small town. She invites the reader in, with her rhetorical question, to share the images and sounds (surely more commonly shared than the country house?) of mundane town life.⁵³ But Cassandra cannot stay here; she must follow the imperatives of the *Jane Eyre* plot and enter the narrative space of Crophorne Manor, where she will become governess.⁵⁴

In a lesser novel – a straight-forward romantic novel, perhaps – Cassandra would have been able to see Crophorne Manor from the train as she arrives, but here she misses it. Her first sight of the house is conveyed to us in a distinctly imagist style:

⁵² This may be an ironic – and bleak – recreation of Wordsworth's famous observation that 'poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity' (preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 2nd ed., 1802). Taylor never does allow Cassandra the tranquillity to recollect her emotions.

⁵³ Taylor was herself from a lower-middle class background, and brought up in a house on a road 'lined with houses and shops'. See Nicola Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor* (London: Persephone Books, 2009), p. 7.

⁵⁴ The similarity of the name 'Crophorne' to 'Thornfield' offers another allusion to *Jane Eyre*; 'crop' suggests that it is a lesser version of Thornfield.

Cassandra somehow – while getting out of the car, managing her belongings, and following Margaret – received an impression of the façade and, as well as the rows of sashed windows and not quite central pediment, smaller details were snatched at and relinquished by her commenting eye; pieces of dismembered statuary, of dark grey stucco fallen from the walls and a wrought-iron lamp at the head of the steps with its greenish glass cracked. (p. 20)

Perhaps an ‘impression’ is all that is required, for Cassandra and for the reader, as these images conform to our idea of the gothic manor house. Yet this is in fact very different from Jane Eyre’s first description of Thornfield: ‘the early sun shone serenely’, as Jane cheerfully surveys the house: ‘it was three storeys high, of proportions not vast, though considerable: a gentleman’s manor-house, not a nobleman’s seat: battlements round the top gave it a picturesque look’.⁵⁵ In *Palladian*, despite this being the beginning for Cassandra’s story, the house is decaying, in places approaching dereliction; could Taylor be implying that the Brontë legacy is decaying? Or is this simply a kind of narrative short-hand, giving images fitting to a popular memory – rather than the reality - of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*?

As Paul Bailey observes, *Palladian* is a ‘strange little novel’.⁵⁶ He suggests that her intertextual references give clues to her intentions, but I would argue that closer attention to these references compounds the difficulties of interpretation. Humble argues that references to Victorian novels in the feminine middlebrow novel ‘suggest an adherence to traditional narrative values’, but I am unsure what these values are.⁵⁷ Even if we are able to define these values *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* are not straightforward exemplars. As I observed in Chapter 2, while the Brontës’ novels were popular, when they were published they were also considered to be unconventional and extremely shocking. And, part of their continued fascination for readers is their complexity. How can we identify a coherent ‘meaning’ for Taylor’s references to *Wuthering Heights*, if as Lyn Pykett observes, this is a text ‘which seems to be characterised by openness, paradox, complexity, and indeterminacy’?⁵⁸ Similarly, it seems ironic to use *Jane Eyre* as a kind of template, if, as Sally Minogue argues,

⁵⁵ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847; Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1999), p. 85-86.

⁵⁶ Paul Bailey, Introduction to Elizabeth Taylor, *Palladian* (1946; London, Virago, 1985), p. viii.

⁵⁷ Humble, p. 54.

⁵⁸ Lyn Pykett, *Emily Brontë* (Houndmills: Macmillan Education, 1989), p. 130.

Charlotte Brontë ‘sets up various models – developmental, allegorical, psychological, symbolic – but she constantly ironises these systems, undercutting them with Jane’s idiosyncratic form of progress’.⁵⁹

Despite the structural similarities to *Jane Eyre*, the jumbled, eccentric extended family living in Crothorne are more suggestive of *Wuthering Heights*. Cassandra’s employer, the widowed Marion Vanbrugh, lives at Crothorne with his daughter Sophy, his cousin Margaret (whose pregnancy forms the time-frame of the novel), her brother Tom, and their mother, Tinty. The domestic staff, made up of Nanny and Mrs Adams, are also important characters, as is Mrs Veal, the landlady of the local pub. The names again have ironic significance. Taylor has given the family inhabiting this crumbling mansion the surname of the first practitioner of the Palladian style in the early eighteenth century, architect and playwright Sir John Vanbrugh (1664-1726).⁶⁰

Cassandra’s introduction to the family is distinctly gothic: “‘If you discover anything muttering in dark corners, it is Nanny and you must not mind her,” said Margaret. “Hush dear,” said the oldish lady, still sitting among the Ryvita crumbs’ (p. 23). However, this is a self-conscious version of the gothic, designed to amuse the literate reader, with its bathetic comic addition of the modern domestic mundanities of Ryvita. This has similarities to von Arnim’s comedic technique in *Vera*, but the tone and resonance for the reader of this later novel are subtly different. For the 1946 reader, Nanny is a character reminiscent not just of *Wuthering Heights*, but of Stella Gibbons’ *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), itself a satire on popular regional novels, which themselves drew heavily on Victorian gothic melodrama.⁶¹ And, whereas *Vera* anticipated Du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, *Palladian* recalls it: Marion’s wife Violet, who died giving birth to Sophy, was, we are lead to believe, the epitome of beauty and glamour, and her memory weighs heavily on the inhabitants of Crothorne. Nanny’s accounts to the naïve and awkward Cassandra of Violet’s wild ways and infinite sophistication are highly reminiscent of Mrs Danvers, as is her malicious intent: ‘It delighted her to bring

⁵⁹ Sally Minogue, Introduction to Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1999), p. ix.

⁶⁰ Kerry Downes, ‘Vanbrugh, Sir John (1664–1726)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/28059>> [accessed 10 Dec 2010].

⁶¹ For further discussion of the intertextuality of *Cold Comfort Farm* see Faye Hammill, ‘Cold Comfort Farm, D. H. Lawrence and English Literary Culture Between the Wars’, *Modern Fiction Studies* 47:4 (2001): 831-54.

Cassandra to the edge of despair about Violet' (p. 111). Taylor thus draws not only on 19th century narratives, but on the re-imaginings of these narratives by other female middlebrow writers.

There are also echoes of Ivy Compton-Burnett in the witty staccato dialogue of family unpleasantness:

"Forgive my mentioning my own private affairs," said Margaret casually, "but I find, mother, that I am expecting a child."

The old woman started, her fork jagged across her plate.

"Why, Margaret, what a way to say such thing! What a way to tell your mother such a thing! In the middle of a meal."

"It was the way I preferred," Margaret said cruelly. (p. 29)

Nicola Beauman calls this an 'ironic squint' at Compton-Burnett's style, noting that 'Elizabeth's kind of readers would have understood the half-mocking, half-curtseying allusions'.⁶² These readers would perhaps also have noted that *Palladian* is a foray into Compton-Burnett's habitual setting of manor houses populated by dysfunctional families.

In explicitly drawing on this more recent literary culture, Taylor is unusual. Humble notes that in the female middlebrow novel references to other contemporary middlebrow novels are curiously rare.⁶³ In a sense it is surprising that it should be Elizabeth Taylor who would make explicit use of the conventions of middlebrow novels, for she was a particularly private person, who did not become involved in any kind of literary 'scene'.⁶⁴ However, I would suggest that this is consistent with her intention in this novel to debate the uses and meanings of fiction. Her imagined reader is highly familiar not only with the Victorian 'classics' but with interwar middlebrow fiction. These readers understand the Victorian texts through the lens of parodies like *Cold Comfort Farm* and re-imaginings like *Rebecca*, and these inter-war texts are highly resonant in themselves.

⁶² Beauman, 2009, p. 162. Taylor admired Compton-Burnett enormously: in 1947 she wrote that 'I should like to make a signed statement that she is the greatest/only writer now living' (Beauman, p. 195). In 1947 the two novelists became friends; for an account of their relationship see Robert Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy* (London: Peter Owen, 1986).

⁶³ Humble, p. 55.

⁶⁴ N. H. Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2008), p. 5.

Also significant is the establishment in the inter-war period of the Brontë novels in mass culture: one might have an idea of the stories of these novels without having read them.⁶⁵ This brings us back to the difficulty of pinning down the meaning of intertextuality for the reader of *Palladian*, or the author's intentions: a possible interpretation is that it is a satirical commentary on popular understandings of the 19th century narratives. Perhaps Taylor is suggesting that all we have now is a devalued version of those novels? After all, Cassandra 'with all her novel reading' sets out to become a governess 'with nothing to commend her to such a profession, beyond the fact of her school lessons being fresh still in her mind and, along with that, a very proper willingness to fall in love, the more despairingly the better, with her employer' (p. 17). Cassandra, surely, has not read properly, if this is all she has learned. (Similarly, Lucy, despite inheriting thousands of books from her father, has not learned enough to know not to marry Wemyss.)

Cassandra herself is a pale shadow of the self-possessed, strong-willed Jane Eyre:

"How are you going to get on with Sophy?" [Marion] asked.

"I hope... I think... I shall do my..." she began to falter, in a little governessy voice.

She knew that Jane Eyre had answered up better than that to her Mr Rochester. (p. 35)

In contrast to the relationship of equals sought and achieved by Jane, Cassandra remains, even as she moves from governess to wife, the young pupil to be educated by Marion. He sees her as child-like, as Wemyss does Lucy: watching her practice writing Greek he decides "She is like a good child – curiously empty" (p. 51), ripe for his didacticism. There is no assertive 'Reader, I married him' for Cassandra.⁶⁶ Marion simply asks and there is no question of refusal; as Tom observes, 'It is never done' (p. 170). And as Cassandra fails to measure up to Jane, Marion fails to measure up to Mr Edward Rochester; along with giving him a name of dubious masculinity, Taylor makes the 'hero' a scholar of ancient Greek. Cassandra observes his 'thin face, with exaggeratedly

⁶⁵ As, indeed, does *Vera's* Wemyss. See Lucasta Miller's *The Brontë Myth* (London: Vintage, 2002) for an excellent discussion of the transformation of the Brontës into icons.

⁶⁶ *Jane Eyre*, p. 397.

long hands like the hands in an Elizabethan portrait, the greenish gold hair, his rather affected clothes', but is not dissuaded in her romantic role for him: "He will do to fall in love with," Cassandra thought with some relief' (p. 38). This is a bleakly utilitarian view of romance.

In persisting in seeing Marion as her Mr Rochester, Cassandra is perhaps making a hopeful mistake. In his marriage to the dynamic Violet, the cultivated and ineffectual Marion appears to be more of an Edgar Linton, and this is reinforced by the discovery that Tom was Violet's lover, both before and after her marriage to Marion. The references to *Wuthering Heights* are made explicit, as Tom bemoans his role: 'She did it. She turned me into a sort of glowering Heathcliff' (p. 166). Tom trained to be a doctor, but does not practice, instead spending his time drinking heavily, having a desultory and (on his side) affectionless affair with Mrs Veal at the pub, and producing beautiful and disturbing anatomical drawings of pregnant women. Tom is one of a gallery of rather feckless men (including Roddy in *At Mrs Lippincote's*, and Dermot in *A Summer Season*, discussed in the next chapter) produced by Taylor in her novels.

The mundane cruelties of Tom's relationship with Mrs Veal are as central to the novel as the relationship between Marion and Cassandra. At the pub, Mrs Veal tries to get Tom to stay for lunch:

"A nice grilled chop for lunch?" she suggested. "Is that a good idea?" And awaited his next cruelty.

"I'm not staying down. I'm going in a minute."

She smiled gallantly, controlling her trembling lips. It was the worst thing she could have done. Tom could not bear stoicism in those he hurt, could not bear the guilt of forcing them into such courage. (p. 146)

This seemingly innocuous dialogue, with the concise description of the hidden thoughts and feelings of the speakers, is typical of Taylor. As Rebecca Abrams observes, 'again and again, the world of objects, routines and domestic necessities is expertly drawn, and beneath that the world of half-conscious feeling, suppressed longings, denied impulses, stifled resentments'.⁶⁷ The devastating psychological truth of Taylor's observation is evident here, even while the reasons for Tom's compulsive drinking and self-loathing

⁶⁷ Rebecca Abrams, 'Commentary – A master of miniaturism' *New Statesman*, 11 June 2001.

remain hidden from us. His behaviour is explained when we discover, late in the novel, that Tom, rather than Marion, is Sophy's father.

"I am drinking myself to death," said Tom. It was melodramatic; but like all melodrama, had the seeds of great tragedy in it. "I am wasted. No use. I am done for."

Marion closed his book. "In a different way, I am done for, too," he said. [...] "I am *reading* myself to death, that is all the difference is," (p. 65)

Taylor's concise, multi-layered prose, while offering an acute insight into lives of her characters, also considers the meanings and values of fiction. This scene encapsulates the ambivalence that permeates the novel. Reading here is not merely a source of delusion, as it is for Cassandra; in this novel built on intertextuality, Marion melodramatically announces that he is 'reading himself to death'. Reading appears to be sucking the life out of him; he remains in his library, oblivious to the decay of the house around him, and admits "I only know things out of books" (p. 66). Perhaps the consequences of his reading are so dire because Marion reads ancient Greek (which Tom calls a 'dead language' p. 64), not novels. He is certainly unlike his namesake, Sir John Vanbrugh, who was a successful playwright as well as an architect of houses. Yet Marion is, in many instances, clear and rational in the face of Tom's melodrama. When Tom argues that Violet was being punished for her adultery when she died in childbirth, Marion protests, "Tom, we are grown-up people. I don't understand this in you – this talk of good and bad and deserving punishment. What next? The coils of fate?" (p. 167).

Yet melodrama as a mode is not dismissed; it has, in Taylor's view, 'the seeds of great tragedy in it'. Taylor put this belief into practice here: as well as making her characters prone to the melodramatic pronouncements above, *Palladian* comes closer to a melodramatic plot than any of her subsequent novels when Sophy is killed by a falling statue. In keeping with the whole of the novel, this is a self-conscious experiment in form; but while consistent with Taylor's engagement with *Wuthering Heights*, it jarred with some readers. Paul Bailey calls it 'stagey';⁶⁸ certainly, it is surprising from a writer

⁶⁸ Bailey, p. x.

who will (*Palladian* excepted) consistently slide away from 'the pathos or excitement of a big scene',⁶⁹ and will typically express tragedy through understatement and omission.

However, while a 'big scene' for Taylor, Sophy's death is presented very succinctly:

In a dreamlike way, the statue appeared to move. It reeled drunkenly and Tom stood frozen in a world where things happened beyond his understanding and Cassandra screamed, her hands clapped over her face.

Tom was strong. He soon lifted the bulk of broken stone, but Sophy, of course, was dead. (p. 148)

The 'of course' makes clear that Sophy had to die to follow the conventions of the gothic narrative. Sophy's death, I would suggest, is not 'stagey' but novelistic. For Taylor, this assumption of shared understanding with her reader means she need give us nothing more than these two brief sentences. As with *Vera*, there is a sense of tragic inevitability to the narrative. The chapter ends here, and the next chapter begins with the funeral. Amidst tragedy, Taylor's ironic eye does not falter: she places Mrs Veal at the back of the church, watching and criticising, and gives the picture through her eyes:

There was plenty to criticise. Firstly, she thought it unsuitable that Margaret [who is heavily pregnant] should be there at all, especially buttoned up in bottle-green and looking well. Few of them seemed to know how to behave on such an occasion. Tom fidgeted, cast bored looks at the stained-glass window and at his finger-nails; Cassandra looked merely frightened as she had done the first time Mrs Veal saw her, in the train; Tinty wept, but into a pink handkerchief: as for Marion, the paler he was, the more effeminate he looked. Only Nanny redeemed them, her hands clasped, her walk impressive, her sealskin coat so funereal. She was right in her heart and knew how to express those emotions rightly. She mourned. (p. 149)

They all fail to live up to the demands of the situation, but for once it is not novels that are the arbiters of proper behaviour but the bathetic voice of Mrs Veal, the representative of mundane, working-class provincialism. (Though Mrs Veal's perspective is similar to that of the gothic novel: mourners should concentrate on the matter in hand, while weeping, and wearing black.) In the course of this paragraph,

⁶⁹ William Pritchard, 'Reconsideration: Elizabeth Taylor – Almost Austen' *New Republic*, 26 March 1984, p. 37.

Taylor slips silently from the observations of Mrs Veal to her own authorial voice, once again inside the heads of her characters. She immediately ironises Nanny mourning 'rightly' by entering the head of Tom, who is privy to Nanny's enjoyment of funerals. Mrs Veal's observations are also rendered ironic. For once the Vanbrugh family, and Cassandra *are* behaving appropriately; they are no longer behaving according to the dictates of fiction, but are authentically wretched.

Margaret, significantly, leaves the church before the service ends, and waits in the car. Throughout the novel, while Marion reads himself to death in his crumbling house, Margaret has stood for pragmatism and modernity. Her pregnancy has formed the time-span of the novel, and at the end she leaves Crothorne in a taxi, to go to hospital and have her baby. It could be argued that the social context of the immediate post-war period *is* present, in a symbolic sense. Crothorne is characterised by decay and fragmentation: Marion laments that he is 'done for' (p. 65) as, Taylor implies, is his house and the landed gentry in general. Sophy is killed by the dangerously unstable statuary, and then the conservatory falls in: 'a foreshadowing of what might happen to the house itself, how, after a long process of decay, one day it would suddenly not be a house any more' (p. 172-3). Of course, this loss is not considered nostalgically; *Palladian* is the antithesis of the elegiac country house novel indentified by Humble. Crothorne is a place of death and desolation, from which Margaret, Tom and Tinty escape at the end of the novel.⁷⁰ Neil Reeve argues that in *Palladian* there is a 'sense that material of dark contemporary resonance, involving power, cruelty, the paralysis of grief or self delusion, and the uncovering of unsuspected horrors, has been lifted out of the ordinary world and concentrated for closer inspection'. In contrast to the usual impression of Taylor as swimming against a tide of 'sociological' novels,⁷¹ Reeve argues that it was not 'unusual for writing of the period to address such material obliquely rather than directly – it was arguably more characteristic, more amenable to the prevailing temper'.⁷²

Like her Greek mythological name-sake, Cassandra has correctly predicted the future; after Sophy's death she does marry Marion. However, again like the mythological

⁷⁰ Taylor's lack of nostalgia for the country house is perhaps unsurprising given that she was an active member of the Communist Party in the late 1930s, and remained a Labour supporter for the rest of her life.

⁷¹ Leclercq, p. 4.

⁷² Reeve, p. 33.

Cassandra, this does not mean things end well for our Cassandra. In marrying Marion, Taylor suggests, Cassandra becomes a permanent prisoner in her own delusion. As Tinty observes, “It is like one of the fairy tales.” To which Margaret, clear-sighted, replies “But not a fairy tale in which I should want to be the heroine. [...] One begins to see what is meant by ‘they lived happily ever after.’” (p. 190)

The final image of the novel is peculiarly chilling, leaving us in no doubt of the desolation of the manor, despite the supposedly happy newly-wed couple within:

When Marion and Cassandra went indoors, only a lop-sided hen was left to enliven the façade [...] The hen pecked between the cracks of the terrace paving stones and wandered into the hall. But as the dark shadows of indoors fell coldly across it like a knife, it turned and tottered back into the sunshine. (p. 192)

After the continual ambivalent teasing out of the significance of the 19th century narratives, Taylor appears finally to condemn them: Cassandra and Marion are indoors (within the conventions of the narrative) where the dark shadows fall coldly like a knife. However, there is a glimmer of hope in this bleak conclusion. An alternative, happier future does exist out there in the sunshine with the lop-sided hen, to which Taylor has released the other members of the family. These final sentences are also notable for their style; ironically, while the entire novel is a mesh of intertextual resonances, Taylor’s writing is entirely distinctive. Nicola Beauman argues that in sentences like these ‘the subtlety and humour and ironic observation are by now so characteristic of Elizabeth’s style that one cannot imagine them being written by anyone else’.⁷³

The reception of *Palladian*, like *Vera*, was mixed. Interestingly, the most enthusiastic contemporary reviews came from fellow novelists. Rosamond Lehmann called Taylor ‘sophisticated, sensitive, and brilliantly amusing, with a kind of stripped, piercing feminine wit not unlike that of Elizabeth Bowen’, an eloquent piece of praise still used by Virago for their cover blurb; L. P. Hartley was similarly complementary.⁷⁴ Rayner Heppenstall immediately noted that ‘Miss Taylor is ironical’, and praised her ‘pure and

⁷³ Beauman, 2009, p. 164.

⁷⁴ Rosamond Lehmann, *The Listener*, 3 October 1946, p. 450; L. P. Hartley quoted in Beauman, 2009, p. 171-2.

exact gift'.⁷⁵ In comparison, it is later critics who appear less convinced by the novel, and unsure how to read it: even Paul Bailey, who wrote several appreciative introductions to the Virago editions seems confused by *Palladian*. Bizarrely, given the unequivocally bleak ending, he writes that Tom and Mrs Veal's 'slightly grubby liaison is a further reminder that Cassandra and Marion are among the charmed and blessed'.⁷⁶ Florence Leclercq, in particular, is unable to get to grips with the novel, concluding 'It is indeed difficult to decide what Elizabeth Taylor attempted to do when she wrote *Palladian*'.⁷⁷ She struggles with Taylor's tone, arguing that the recurrence of clichés 'almost suggests satire at times. Yet there is an intentness of purpose which seems at odds with any possibility of satire'.⁷⁸

Seeing 'intentness of purpose' as incompatible with satire renders Taylor's approach incomprehensible to Leclercq, for that is exactly what she does: ironises and satirises forms of fiction, with great intentness of purpose. Leclercq's difficulties illustrate again the importance of 'psychical accord' between reader and author. Leclercq has read the required novels, and is fully able to spot the intertextual references in *Palladian*, yet she does not share the same sense of the resonances of these texts. To her Taylor's novel is not witty and insightful; she finds it instead to be flawed, with a 'heavy, almost ironic reliance on clichés' that produce an 'embarrassing effect upon the reader'.⁷⁹ She almost sees the irony, but not quite. Taylor chooses to use what Linda Hutcheon calls 'this strange mode of discourse where you say something you don't actually mean and expect people to understand not only what you do actually mean but also your attitude towards it'.⁸⁰ Crucially, Leclercq lacks this understanding of Taylor's attitude. Thought of in Hutcheon's terms, understanding irony is challenging to the reader, and in Taylor's subtle, confusing and complex novel, particularly so. Given that her focus in *Palladian* is on fiction itself, it is perhaps unsurprising that it is other novelists who have been most appreciative of the novel.

⁷⁵ Rayner Heppenstall, 'New Novels', *The New Statesman and Nation*, 9 November 1946, p. 343.

⁷⁶ Bailey, p. x.

⁷⁷ Leclercq, p. 21.

⁷⁸ Leclercq, p. 22.

⁷⁹ Leclercq, p. 22.

⁸⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 2.

Taylor is debating the resonances, not only of the 'classics' of the female canon, but also of contemporary texts. As Jacqueline Wilkott comments, Taylor 'helps us understand exactly how complicated the relations between the ironic and romantic traditions are – traditions that are not just nineteenth century echoes but a living chorus to which the voices of Ivy Compton Burnett and Virginia Woolf add new overtones and modalities'.⁸¹ And, I think it is important to add, the voices of more middlebrow writers, especially Daphne Du Maurier and Stella Gibbons. In *Palladian*, Taylor appears to be identifying and reflecting on her own literary tradition. Wilkott makes an important observation in noting how 'complicated the relations between the ironic and romantic traditions are'. That feminine middlebrow texts refer to and recall the novels of Austen and the Brontës in tandem is little remarked on, but it is striking and strange. These are not, on the face of it, natural bedfellows, and perhaps the play between these two traditions contributes to the unsettling effect and uncertain reception of both *Palladian* and *Vera*.⁸² John Middleton Murray's verdict on *Vera*, mentioned earlier, is again perceptive: 'when the critics are faced with *Wuthering Heights* by Jane Austen, they don't know what to say'.⁸³

While reflecting on, and situating themselves within a female tradition of writing in *Vera* and *Palladian* both von Arnim and Taylor are creating something *new*. In this they are not alone; as Diana Wallace observes of women writers of the interwar period, 'writing about their predecessors [...] was a way of both locating themselves in a tradition *and* marking difference from earlier writers'.⁸⁴ However, they remain unique: I can think of no contemporary of von Arnim who utilises comedy to express anger to the same extent. She shares a lightness of touch with Jane Austen, but she moves far beyond the 'eruption[s] of fear and hatred into the relationships of everyday life' identified by D. W. Harding.⁸⁵ Austen offered stabs of criticism within the form of the

⁸¹ Jacqueline Wilkott, 'Games of Hide and Seek', *The Women's Review of Books*, 4:10-11 (1987), p. 31.

⁸² Charlotte Brontë, famously, saw no common ground in Austen's novels. She wrote that Austen 'ruffles her reader with nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound: the Passions are perfectly unknown to her'. Charlotte Brontë to W. S. Williams, 14 April 1850, quoted in 'Jane Austen's Art and her Literary Reputation', <<http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/janeart.html>> [accessed 20 July 2010].

⁸³ Quoted in Karen Osborne, 'Elizabeth', *The Author of Elizabeth and her German Garden* (London: The Bodley Head, 1986), 231.

⁸⁴ Wallace, p. 8.

⁸⁵ W. Harding, 'Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen' in *Regulated Hatred and Other Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. by Monica Lawlor (London: Athlone Press, 1998), p. 10 (first publ. in *Scrutiny*, 8 (1940), 346-62)

romance; von Arnim utilises the form of a romantic comedy to depict tragedy, and most crucially, to express anger. In contrast to the infrequent 'eruptions' of Austen, von Arnim's critique in *Vera* is constant. *Vera* is thus subversive in both content and form.

Elizabeth Taylor's technique and subject matter in *Palladian* are similarly distinctive. The layers of intertextuality are so tightly packed as to evade conclusive interpretation, but the subtle, evaluating, ironic voice is clear. Taylor is sometimes compared to Barbara Pym, who also utilises an ironic voice to dissect quotidian provincial lives, using frequent intertextual references, but she wrote nothing with such a concentrated focus on the meanings and value of fiction. *Palladian*'s continual, awkward self-consciousness is far from the stereotypically realist middlebrow novel read to 'get lost in'. It can be read not simply as a satire on the delusion created by internalising the 19th century narratives, but as a satire on the conventions of the contemporary middlebrow novel itself. The horrible character of Nanny, for example, may be designed to mock the fantasy of the faithful 'old retainer' identified by Humble as a common trope in novels of this period.⁸⁶ The novel can further be read as a satire on Taylor's own metier of the novel packed with intertextual allusion. *Palladian* does not have the warmth of *At Mrs Lippincote's*, where Julia is shown through her understanding of fiction to be charming and likeable. There are suggestions in this first novel that reading can be a source of romantic delusion, as Taylor observes that Julia's daydreams in the kitchen are 'not quite so much like Emily Brontë learning German grammar while she kneaded bread as Julia liked to suppose', but Taylor's censure goes far beyond this in *Palladian*.⁸⁷ Patsy Stoneman argues that the text plays with the categories of romance and gothic in order to identify romance as 'the enemy', and Clare Hanson argues that the novel critiques the 'classical tradition', but Taylor's target is more fundamental than that.⁸⁸ Here, Taylor takes intertextuality to its ultimate extreme, filling the characters' and the readers' heads with books to give us the message, ironic in a novel, that fiction does not tell the truth. Jane Brown Gillette argues that in all her novels Taylor struggles with this paradox of 'the novelist's use of "fiction" to unmask "illusion" and depict the "real"'.⁸⁹ This

⁸⁶ Humble, p. 69.

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Taylor, *At Mrs Lippincote's* (1945; London: Virago, 1988), p. 99.

⁸⁸ Stoneman, p. 149; Clare Hanson, *Hysterical Fictions: The 'Woman's Novel' in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 76.

⁸⁹ Jane Brown Gillette, "Oh, What a Something Web We Weave": The Novels of Elizabeth Taylor', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 35:1 (1989), 94-112, p. 95.

continual, complex reflexivity is in fact more suggestive of post-modernism than the untroubling realist mode considered typical of the middlebrow novel.

Thus the uncertain reception of these two novels could be because they were not middlebrow *enough*. While consciously situating themselves within a tradition of female fiction, their play with form and genre is innovative rather than the 'parasitic' approach posited by Humble as typical of the feminine middlebrow novel.⁹⁰ In this they can be read as truly the inheritors of the Brontës and Jane Austen, who were read by their contemporaries not as the comforting 'classics' they have become, but as innovators. It is ironic that Elizabeth Taylor and Elizabeth von Arnim are labelled and dismissed as 'middlebrow', only to be poorly reviewed when it becomes clear that their novels do not fit the unthreatening mould that this label imposes.

⁹⁰ Humble, p. 11-12

‘One shudders to think what a less sophisticated artist would have made of it’¹

The Comedy of Age: Elizabeth von Arnim’s *Love* (1925) and Elizabeth Taylor’s *In a Summer Season* (1961)

In *Love* and *In a Summer Season* middle-aged women marry younger men. This scenario brings into question assumptions about acceptable behaviour for middle-aged women, throwing concerns about sexual attractiveness and the suitability of sexual feelings, in particular, into sharp relief. As is typical of von Arnim and Taylor, the subject matter is fraught with pain, and again typically both novelists find the subject to be ripe with absurdity and comic potential. These are sophisticated novels; Faye Hammill has identified the words used to name what is elsewhere called sophistication, and almost all could be used to describe them: distinction, chic, elegance, refinement, cosmopolitanism, wit, urbanity, knowingness, irony, frivolity, experience, discrimination, detachment and complexity.² As I demonstrated in the previous chapters, the comedy of Taylor and von Arnim can always be described as ‘knowing’, operating as it does through shared knowledge and understanding, and this is especially true of these novels. When writing these novels about middle-aged protagonists both novelists were middle-aged, experienced novelists, and there are parallels in these novels between subject matter and style. They are, I would suggest, sophisticated comedies of age in the sense of both content and narrative technique, depicting the marriage of middle-aged women to younger men with a particularly mature, experienced comedic voice that combines sympathy with worldly detachment and knowing irony.

Reviewers have repeatedly described Taylor and von Arnim as ‘sophisticated’, in common with many feminine middlebrow novelists, but this is not the straightforward compliment it might at first appear. As a label it offers another way of understanding both the achievements and the trivial reputation of the middlebrow novelist: describing a text as ‘sophisticated’, allows the reviewer to acknowledge the particularly knowing,

¹ Gerald Bullett, ‘*Love*’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 26 March 1925, p. 220.

² Faye Hammill, *Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), p. 7. I am grateful to Faye Hammill for the discussions of sophistication which have informed this chapter.

targeted comedy present in these texts, but also perhaps to contain it as matter of superficial style or feminine charm. The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer observed of von Arnim's *Love* 'her subject is so painful that one shudders to think what a less sophisticated artist would have made of it'³ and one wonders what the reviewer believes is achieved through this sophistication. Has it removed the pain? While I read sophisticated wit as a technique allowing von Arnim and Taylor to entertain and amuse, and show us all the pain of their scenarios, sophistication may be read as taking out the potential sting.

There is a further intersection in these novels between content and narrative technique as von Arnim and Taylor explore the importance for their characters of the ability to laugh. In a typically self-reflexive move, the ability to view the world comically is shown to be a highly significant indicator of identity, self esteem and independence for these women. Von Arnim argues that humour is an absolutely necessary defence to get through the process of aging; Taylor is, typically, more ambivalent: her protagonist Kate's difficulties may in part be due to her 'satirical' nature. This consideration of laughter can again be read as a kind of sophistication. To continue to view the world comically when experienced in the pain of the world requires the knowing, ironic humour associated with sophistication.

Elizabeth von Arnim's *Love* (1925)

The heroine of this novel is Catherine Cumfrit, a forty-six-year-old widow who has been left a very limited allowance by her husband, since he intended to ensure that she was not an attractive candidate for a second marriage. *Love* is the story of Catherine's second marriage, in circumstances Mr Cumfrit would not have foreseen: Catherine is pursued by, and eventually married to a twenty-five-year-old man, Christopher.⁴

Despite the title, this is, as Terence de Vere White observes, a novel about age: von Arnim's focus is upon the significance and meaning of aging for Catherine.⁵ This is,

³ Bullett, *TLS*, 26 March 1925, p. 220.

⁴ An extract from the novel is included in the anthology *The Book of Marriage: The Wisest Answers to the Toughest Questions*, eds Dana Mack and David Blankenhorn (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), under the chapter title 'Should I marry one of my own?'. Intriguingly, this publication was inspired by an Institute for American Values symposium.

⁵ Terence de Vere White, Introduction to Elizabeth von Arnim, *Love* (London: Virago, 1988), p. 5.

like *Christopher and Columbus*, *Vera* and *Mr Skeffington*, a novel that takes a serious issue and finds its absurdity, using comedy not to soften the pain, but to express it. In common with most von Arnim novels, *Love* is a story of a romance, but does not follow the generically typical structure of the romantic comedy: the consequences of this marriage are as significant as the romance that precedes it.

Love is structured in two parts: in the first Catherine's relationship with Christopher is a source of joy and laughter; in the second they marry and Catherine (disastrously, von Arnim suggests) loses her sense of humour. They meet in the theatre, and for the first seventy pages the youthful Christopher persists in believing that Catherine, while perhaps a little older than himself, is simply tired. Seeing her for the first time in daylight, Christopher demands 'why do you look as if you had walked hundreds of miles and not slept for weeks?'.⁶ In response, Catherine laughs. Initially secure in herself, Catherine enjoys Christopher's youth and enthusiasm while gently mocking it: 'How charming to be as young and absurd as that, she thought, laughing up at the creature' (p. 44). She dismisses his romancing as 'being silly' (p. 61) while delighting in the flattery of it.

In *Love*, as with many of her novels, von Arnim is using material from her own life. In 1920 aged fifty-four, she met Michael Frere, aged twenty-four, and began a relationship that would last, on and off, for over a decade. Terence de Vere White writes that *Love* is 'a knowing novel even though the facts of life are laid on in water colour',⁷ but I would argue that von Arnim is both knowing and, rather than writing in 'water colour', is typically unflinching. Catherine, while based on herself (de Vere White suggests that 'her acquaintance must have recognised her before they came to the end of *Love*'s second page⁸), is depicted as a woman who has done little in her comfortable life, who in her relationship with Christopher is succumbing, rather weakly, to flattery. She is an example of one of von Arnim's key concerns: the comfortable middle-class woman who needs 'waking up'. The character of Lucy in *Vera*, as I discussed in the previous chapter, was sleep-walking into her marriage and colluding in her own oppression. Abusive relationships, however, are just one consequence of von Arnim's fundamental

⁶ Elizabeth von Arnim, *Love* (1925; London: Virago, 1988), p. 30. Subsequent references will be in parenthesis in the text.

⁷ De Vere White, p. 8.

⁸ De Vere White, p. 1, 9.

target: the environment of physical comfort and strict convention that she argues creates passive, somnolent women. Catherine, in her life before meeting Christopher, 'undisturbed by desire, unruffled by yearnings', had awakened each morning 'after placid slumbers, strengthened and refreshed for – Sometimes, but very seldom, she paused here and asked, "For what?"' Her comfortable, well-nourished life prepares her for exertions that never come. 'So, she sometimes but very seldom thought, do vegetables flourish in well-manured kitchen gardens.' (p. 63) Von Arnim's analogy is comic, and damning: Catherine has led a vegetable life.

It is the role of the reckless and absurd Christopher to break her out of this vegetative existence. Catherine protests against his attempts to do so:

"When I talk what I'm sure is sense you call it copy-book stuff. And when you talk what I know is nonsense, you're positive it is most right and proper."

"So it is, because it's natural. Yours is all convention and other people's ideas, and what you've been told and not what you've thought for yourself, and nothing to do with a simple following of your natural instincts."

"My natural instincts!"

She was horrified at his supposing she had such things. At her age. The mother of Virginia. (p. 74)

Catherine is not only middle-aged, but a mother to 18-year-old Virginia, and von Arnim finds comic absurdity in the social conventions that dictate that middle-aged mothers do not have 'instincts'. By 'instincts' sexual desires are clearly implied; like Taylor's *In a Summer Season*, this is a novel about the sexual identity of a middle-aged woman.

Catherine, in a life previously 'unruffled by yearnings' has never experienced the sexual passion that Christopher intends to awaken: 'he took her head in his hands and held it back and kissed her really, right on her mouth, as no one in her life before had ever kissed her' (p. 95). The sexual pleasure she feels is a tremendous shock to Catherine, and her subsequent shame is a product of the disjunction between her identity 'tied up in a tangle of relationship, of obligations, of increasing memories' and being Christopher's 'Beloved'. It is simply 'impossible' (p. 95). This is not the only aspect of her identity that is being challenged. When Catherine analyses why she finds such pleasure in being treated as a precious treasure by Christopher, she considers her marriage, in which 'she had been a treasure, certainly, but of the other kind, the kind that does things for somebody else'. Her life has been spent in 'making other people comfortable and happy, and being rewarded by their affection and dependence' (p. 62).

In reconsidering her identity, Catherine is shown to be the product of others' expectations. With Christopher she feels young, because he sees her as young, but to her son-in-law's curate, a young man of the same age, she is 'his Rector's wife's mother', 'some one, perhaps more accurately something, to be placed carefully in a chair out of a draught and then left', after being appropriately supplied with shawls and cushions. With her daughter Virginia and son-in-law Stephen 'she felt just as old as they made her' (p. 113). In the tantalising glimpses of self-knowledge that von Arnim allows her, Catherine wonders uneasily if she is 'a mere vessel of receptiveness, a transparent vessel into which other people poured their view of her, and she instantly reflected the exact colour of their opinion?' (p. 113). Catherine considers her life, passing from 'good little girl' to 'somebody's wife' to 'somebody's mother' – 'how had she not, when that too ended, stretched out her arms to the sun and cried out all to herself, "Now I'm going to be me!"' (p. 115). After her daughter Virginia left home to be married, she has had three short months in which she lived 'an amusing, independent, dignified small life' (p. 116).

Kathleen Woodward, in her book *Aging and Its Discontents*, asserts that 'youth is [...] understood as giving one the right to be seen and heard',⁹ and indeed, placed in a chair with shawls and cushions, Catherine is clearly meant to be silent and unobtrusive, but von Arnim also suggest the possible compensations of aging. Finally independent, Catherine had been able to carve out a 'dignified small life' away from the family whose assumptions define her as elderly and redundant. Woodward also considers questions of gender to be subordinate to those of aging,¹⁰ but it is clear that in the case of Catherine her gender defines her social position as fundamentally as her age. Von Arnim's account of Catherine as a young woman is of a wife and mother who is not seen or heard; she subsumes her desires to quietly support her family.

These early chapters may suggest that von Arnim is simply arguing that through her relationship with Christopher Catherine is now being awakened to a freer, fuller life, developing an identity that is more than simply 'wife' or 'mother', but the novel develops into something more complex. Von Arnim demonstrates a subtle appreciation

⁹ Kathleen Woodward, *Aging and Its Discontents*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), p.149.

¹⁰ Woodward, p. 16.

of the interplay of aging, gender and sexuality. Aging has in fact given Catherine some power by ending her role as wife: as a widow Catherine could, as her son-in-law's mother Mrs Colquhoun has, establish herself as the elder matriarch who monitors and advises Stephen and Virginia.¹¹ Being 'young' with Christopher instead makes her powerless again by returning her to the dependent role of wife, and in taking on Christopher's mistaken view of her age, she is again allowing herself to be constructed by others. In entering a relationship with Christopher, rather than being freed, von Arnim implies that Catherine is succumbing to another kind of tyranny. Christopher intends to dictate her behaviour, just as her first husband did, merely in a different way. When Christopher insists that Catherine will soon be frantically in love too, she protests "I've never done anything frantically in my life." His reply is telling: "I'm going to make you." (p. 71)

Catherine's independence of spirit can be traced through the presence – or absence – of laughter. Visiting Virginia and Stephen in an attempt to escape the violently passionate Christopher, Catherine realises:

She hadn't laughed since last she was with Christopher. At Chickover nobody laughed. A serious smile from Virginia, a bright conventional smile from Mrs. Colquhoun, no smile at all from Stephen; that was the nearest they got to it. Laughter – one of the most precious of God's gifts; the very salt, the very light, the very fresh air of life; the divine disinfectant, the heavenly purge. Could one ever be real friends with somebody one didn't laugh with? Of course one couldn't. (p. 170)

Given von Arnim's commitment to the comic mode I think it would be fair to read Catherine's thoughts, in this instance, as the novelist's opinions. Laughter is the very air of life, and more interestingly, it is also the 'divine disinfectant' and the 'heavenly purge'. It is that which makes us clean, purging us of stifling convention, hypocrisy, and repressed emotion. The notion of laughter as a 'purge' recalls Freud's understanding of jokes as releasing repression: 'Anyone who has allowed the truth to slip out in an unguarded moment is in fact glad to be free of pretence.'¹² And what could be more Godly than the truth? In this house of non-laughing Christianity, Catherine asserts that to laugh is morally right and Christian. And again that closeness of understanding that

¹¹ Von Arnim herself enjoyed years of independent widowhood before marrying Earl Francis Russell in 1916.

¹² Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (Harmondsworth: Penguin: 1976), p. 150.

Freud termed 'psychical accord' is stated: to be 'real friends' one must laugh together. With Christopher, crucially, Catherine laughs.

Christopher and Catherine's relationship, of course, would not be problematic were the genders reversed. To highlight this hypocrisy Catherine's eighteen-year-old daughter Virginia is married to a forty-seven-year-old clergyman, Stephen. At first Christopher is not clear who this 'Stephen' is, and his misunderstandings cause Catherine to cry with laughter:

she went off into a fit of laughter, and laughed in the heavenly way he had seen her laugh once before – yes, that was over Stephen too – so it was; Stephen seemed a sure draw – with complete abandonment, till she had to pull out a handkerchief to wipe her eyes. (p. 51)

Christopher's judgement that Stephen is a 'rocky old reprobate', and if he has a young wife she must be 'a nasty girl' (p. 51) send Catherine into paroxysms of laughter because they are such a comic combination of misapprehension, repression, and just the tiniest suggestion of possible truth. Stephen, serious and judgemental, is a totem of inhibition for Catherine, and to laugh at him is to experience 'complete abandonment'. Significantly it is only now, before she falls in love with Christopher, that Catherine is able to laugh like this. Her laughter is an expression of her independence of spirit, for once in love and emotionally dependent on Christopher, there is no laughter.

On her honeymoon, tired out by trying to keep up with Christopher, she shrinks from his noticing her fatigue, where once she laughed. 'Now she couldn't laugh, she found – she couldn't bring herself to say, with the gay indifference, the take-me-as-I-am-or-leave-me attitude that was hers at the beginning, a word about age.' (p. 250) Back in London at a dinner party given by her friends, Catherine looks on as Christopher enjoys talking to the pretty young woman in the party. Another middle-aged woman – a wiser one, it is implied – sees Catherine's face and observes 'marriage [...] was rich in humiliations. If one allowed it to be, that is; if one didn't keep them out by the only real defence – laughter' (p. 345). The knife twists further as Christopher invites the young woman to visit them, and she replies "“But wouldn't that bore your mother dreadfully?”" (p. 348). Catherine would need a great deal of spirit to laugh this humiliation off.

Laughter and aging are intertwined in this novel. In a development that suggests that to cease to laugh is to become old, once in love with Christopher and no longer laughing, Catherine also loses her looks. Before marriage 'she had Christopher to love her, to comfort her, to feed her with sweet names; and she flowered in his warmth into a beauty' (p. 241), but when they return the housekeeper 'couldn't have believed such a change possible in that short time. "It's them honeymoons," she said to herself, shaking her head over the saucepans. They did no good to a woman, she thought, not after a certain age' (p. 271). The housekeeper clearly puts Catherine's shocking decline down to excessive sexual activity, inappropriate and over-taxing for a middle-aged woman.

Women in von Arnim's novels do not age gradually, but undergo catastrophic transformations, from pretty young thing to crone. In *Mr Skeffington*, Fanny, after having diphtheria goes from being a celebrated beauty to a 'wraith-like parody of the past'.¹³ Kate O'Brien, reviewing *Mr Skeffington*, understandably objected to this dramatic transformation and wrote that it was a 'premiss which one accepts in this artificial comedy, but which is, of course, absurd. The kind of face which is claimed for Fanny does not become a pitiable thing just because its well-cherished owner is fifty and has had diphtheria'.¹⁴ In this departure from realism, however, von Arnim is not so much following the conventions of comedy as those of the fairy-tale. As Alison Hennegan observes in her analysis of von Arnim's novels, 'faces are fertile of metaphor and proverb'.¹⁵ The motifs of the fairy-tale are visible in many von Arnim novels, from the grotesque transformations of middle-aged women into old age in *Love*, *Mr Skeffington*, and *The Jasmine Farm* (1934), to the 'fairy-hearted' Lucy trapped by the ogre-like Wemyss in *Vera*. Although aging happens gradually, it is not perceived as gradual, and for the women in these novels the consequences of age occur with shocking suddenness.¹⁶ As Kathleen Woodward observes, 'Age is a subtle continuum, but we organise this continuum into "polar opposites"'.¹⁷

¹³ Elizabeth von Arnim, *Mr Skeffington* (1940; London: Virago, 1993), p. 90. Leslie de Charms suggests that von Arnim originally intended *Mr Skeffington* to be a 'realisation of love's impermanence with her discovery of the compensations possible for a properly adventurous spirit, and of that spirit triumphant as it explores life's further opportunities'. Leslie de Charms, *Elizabeth of the German Garden* (London: Heinemann, 1958), p. 363. This would have been an intriguing reconsideration of the themes explored in *Love*, but the novel von Arnim eventually wrote did not fulfil these aims.

¹⁴ Kate O'Brien, 'Fiction', *The Spectator*, 2 February 1940.

¹⁵ Alison Hennegan, 'In a Class of Her Own: Elizabeth von Arnim' in *Women Writers of the 1930s*, ed. by Maroula Joannou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 109.

¹⁶ Karen Osborne recounts that von Arnim had a facelift in 1919, and that her second husband, Earl Russell, was 'delighted to find that he was now married to a woman who closely resembled a fourteen-

Vita Sackville-West, in her 1930 novel *The Edwardians*, asserts: 'This question of the middle-aged woman's beauty and desirability has never been sufficiently exploited by novelists. It is one of the minor dramas of life; yet who are we to call it minor, when to the women concerned it involves the whole purpose of their existence.'¹⁸ Sackville-West is aware that as a subject for a novel this might be regarded as trivial; one of the minor domestic concerns of women that are regarded as the territory of middlebrow novels. Yet, as she observes, given how women's identities are formed on the basis of sexual suitability this is indeed pivotal to their whole existence. Von Arnim did exploit this question, making it a central theme not only in *Love*, but in *Expiation* (1929), *Introduction to Sally* (1926), *The Jasmine Farm* (1934), and *Mr Skeffington* (1940). Alison Hennegan observes that for the women in *The Jasmine Farm* 'their faces are amongst their most important assets; but their faces also provide one of the most important elements in their own sense of identity: from them they take their sense of who and what they are, what their place in the world is and what is owed to them by the world'.¹⁹

These themes are also explored in Rose Macaulay's 1922 novel *Dangerous Ages*, itself a response to the Danish bestseller *The Dangerous Age*, by Karin Michaëlis.²⁰ Their mode differs from that of von Arnim: Macaulay's novel, while satirical, I would argue is not actually funny and Sackville-West does not use humour in her treatment of the subject in *The Edwardians*, nor in her 1932 novel *Family History* about an affair between a woman nearing forty and a man fifteen years younger. In content, however, these novels closely mirror von Arnim's concerns about Catherine's passive and inactive life and her subsequent dependency on Christopher's devotion. In *Dangerous Ages* Macaulay suggests that a passive, domestic life results in an inactive mind; in *Family History* Sackville-West observes the implications this has for relationships

year-old girl'. This rather repellent comment again suggests the fairy-tale transformations possible in von Arnim's world. Osborne, 'Elizabeth', *The Author of Elizabeth and her German Garden* (London: The Bodley Head, 1986), p. 201.

¹⁷ Woodward, p. 6.

¹⁸ Vita Sackville-West, *The Edwardians* (1930), p. 180, quoted in Sophie Blanch 'Contested Wills: Reclaiming the Daughter's Inheritance in Vita Sackville-West's *The Edwardians*', *Critical Survey*, vol 19, 1, 2007, p. 80.

¹⁹ Hennegan, p. 109. The question of middle-aged female identity is of course also explored in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925).

²⁰ See Sue Thomas, 'Libertarian Liberalism and the Comic Mode: Rose Macaulay's Fiction of the 1920s', *Durham University Journal*, 86.1 (1994), p. 100.

between men and women: 'Love and the woman were insufficient for an active mind. Love and the man, however, were all-too-sufficient for a starved heart and an unoccupied mind.'²¹

Sackville-West's and Macaulay's observations are similar to those of von Arnim in her consideration of Catherine's 'vegetable' life, and these differences between the sexes are enacted in *Love*. On the honeymoon, after three days in which 'they never laughed. They were dead serious. They talked mainly in whispers, because passion always whispers' (p. 246), Christopher wakes up feeling 'he would like a game of golf. Exercise. Out of doors. With a man' (p. 247). For the old Catherine, loving, but not in love, these homosocial needs would have posed no problem, but the newly insecure Catherine is entirely dependent on Christopher's attentions, and interprets any time away from her as a sign that she is showing her age. Unfortunately, having ceased to laugh, it is love that has made her look tired. Catherine is the personification of the truism that we are as old as we feel: harried by worries of looking old, she *does* look old, her psychological state dramatically exposed by her face. This makes her position even more tragic as she enters a vicious circle of fears about aging. However, unlike Sackville-West, the 'sophisticated artist' Elizabeth von Arnim is able to make this tragedy darkly comic.

Artificial construction of beauty, von Arnim suggests, can be sadly incompatible with physical passion. The funniest moments of *The Jasmine Farm* (1931) are von Arnim's observations on the artifices fifty-three-year-old Daisy uses to appear young. Her daughter Terry defends her: 'Why shouldn't she, now that nature was giving out, take to art, and stay exquisite as long as possible? The only drawback was that one couldn't hug her and kiss her as emphatically as one wanted to. One had to be careful. Something might break, she felt, or come off.'²² Fanny, in *Mr Skeffington*, realises her latest adorer must not be allowed to touch her hair anymore: 'If he did, the most awful things might happen; the most awful things *must* happen, when a woman lets herself have adorers, while at the same time easily coming to bits.'²³ Ironically, these artifices run the risk of being destroyed by the very admirers they aim to attract. In *Love* Catherine fares rather better, at least at the beginning of her forays into artifice: 'The

²¹ Thomas, p. 100; Vita Sackville-West, *Family History* (London: Virago, 1986), p. 147.

²² Elizabeth von Arnim, *The Jasmine Farm* (1934; London: William Heinemann, 1937), p. 78.

²³ Elizabeth von Arnim, *Mr Skeffington* (1940; London: Virago, 1993), p. 6.

great feature of Maria Rome's treatment was that it was husband-proof. Nothing came off' (p. 334). It is for this kind of wit that von Arnim is regarded as 'sophisticated'; it is worldly and knowing, finding delight and laughter in a very painfully absurd reality.

Catherine, in contrast to the characters Daisy and Fanny, is not sophisticated. Newly married, 'she went out and bought a lip-stick; and such had been the innocence of her life in these matters that she blushed when she asked for one' (p. 302). She does not find the lipstick sufficient and instead goes to a professional, Maria Rome of Sackville Street. After her ministrations 'She looked not only ten, fifteen years younger and really, really pretty, but she looked so very fashionable. A little adventurous, perhaps, the last vestiges of the quiet country lady that still had survived the rubbings-off of Christopher all gone, but how – well, how *pretty*' (p. 306). Faye Hammill argues that 'sophistication was still very much a contested term in the interwar years [...] within a single text, it is often used as a term of both praise and criticism'.²⁴ This ambiguity is enacted in Catherine's forays into make-up: she is painfully aware that while cosmetics makes her look 'adventurous' and 'fashionable' (qualities closely associated with sophistication) they are also signifiers of an earlier understanding of sophistication as associated with fraudulence and inauthenticity. Having these treatments makes Catherine look 'knowing', but through von Arnim's use of free indirect style her true innocence is revealed, as she puts pitiful faith in a Spanish doctor who 'undertook to restore youth. Marvellous, blissful, if he really could! A slight operation, said the papers, and there you were' (p. 351). Unfortunately, after 11 treatments and the expenditure of £50 she has gained only exhaustion and the knowledge that she is a fool (p. 370). Intrinsic to sophistication, I would suggest, is the ability to laugh at yourself; the wiser middle-aged woman who comments that laughter is a necessary defence against the humiliations of marriage is clearly sophisticated in this sense. It is therefore perhaps Catherine's lack of sophistication that makes her attempts to remain young so tragic.

Frank Swinnerton, becoming friends with von Arnim in 1919, wrote that he entered a world 'in which lavender and furs were curiously associated with sophistication, pre-war Germany, ancient and modern love-affairs, sentiment, shrewdness, cruelty, and

²⁴ Hammill, p. 128. For a full account of the etymology of sophistication, and words associated with it, see pp. 1-9.

unflinching candours about husbands'.²⁵ His comments indicate how von Arnim's sophistication is made up of both sentiment and qualities that might seem to be opposed: shrewdness, cruelty and unflinching candour. However, as Hammill observes in her analysis of Noel Coward's *Private Lives*, this is actually characteristic of sophistication: 'The dynamic opposition between romantic sentiment and worldly disillusionment in Coward's play is typical of the early twentieth-century sophisticated text'.²⁶ Hammill's account of sophistication in *Private Lives* offers another way in which we might understand how the feminine middlebrow novel 'has it both ways', enjoying both cruel wit and romantic sentiment: 'It is, perhaps, the self-consciousness about the conventions of romance which means that a play such as *Private Lives* can retain a witty, even 'jagged' element without destroying the intensely romantic mood or the belief in the permanence of a great love'.²⁷ Von Arnim's novels are always self-conscious, and this is also part of their sophisticated, knowing quality: we share the knowledge of the romantic conventions she will use, and can enjoy them, while also appreciating her witty, unflinching critique. The romance, it is important to note, is as real and powerful as the critique; in *Love Catherine*'s feelings are described with insight and sympathy. The novel's theme, the *TLS* reviewer notes, affords von Arnim 'abundant opportunities of satire *and tenderness*' (my italics).²⁸

This conjunction of feeling and detachment is also visible in attempts to theorise ironic humour. A. R. Thompson writes that:

In irony, emotions clash...it is both emotional and intellectual – in its literary manifestations, at any rate. To perceive it one must be detached and cool; to feel it one must be pained for a person or ideal gone amiss. Laughter rises but is withered on the lips. Someone or something we cherish is cruelly made game of; we see the joke but are hurt by it. It follows from this view that contrasts which conform exactly to the objective definitions of irony are not ironical at all when they do not rouse these conflicting feelings.²⁹

As I argued in Chapter 2, it seems counterintuitive that the ironic technique that requires such a close involvement and understanding from reader and author should be simply

²⁵ Frank Swinnerton, *Figures in the Foreground: Literary Reminiscences 1917-1940*, rev. edn (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1937, rev. 1963), p. 52.

²⁶ Hammill, p. 114.

²⁷ Hammill, p. 115.

²⁸ Bullett, *TLS*, 26 March 1925, p. 220.

²⁹ A. R. Thompson, *The Dry Mock, A Study of Irony in Drama*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948), p. 15.

detached; here Thompson suggests, as Hamill has argued of sophistication, apparently paradoxical elements are in fact compatible. In this analysis irony must be felt as well as perceived; von Arnim's conjunction of laughter and pain is therefore a necessary combination rather than a conflict of elements. This is similar to J. B. Priestley's view that the 'great humorist' conjoins irony, affection, and contact with reality. A great humorist therefore must make us think about life or feel deeply about it, he argues.³⁰ As *Love* progresses laughter is 'withered on the lips'. Stephen, believing that Catherine and Christopher have spent the night together, forces them to marry, then attempts to cut them off from his household with Virginia. Stephen is certain that it is understood that after the wedding the couple will be ostracised, but Virginia disagrees, taking the view that her mother's marriage is not more terrible than her own. It is ironic that Stephen cannot understand Catherine and Christopher's relationship when he himself has been so transformed by his love for the young Virginia, but this is exactly why it appals him, as he finds the idea that a middle-aged woman should be similarly transformed by passion grotesque. Mrs Colquhoun articulates the view that age should preclude change: 'Beginnings were not suitable, she felt, after a certain age, especially not for women' (p. 187).³¹

Stephen's devastation at this fundamental disagreement with his wife is depicted in a sombre and succinct chapter, reminiscent of von Arnim's concise treatment of Mr Twist's conflict with his mother in *Christopher and Columbus*. Stephen finds that he, the patriarch, is utterly dependent on his wife: 'he owed her everything, and above all he owed her his return to youth' (p. 289). The mood darkens in this chapter, as the rift between husband and wife deepens:

"She weeps at night. She - she weeps when she thinks I am asleep. If I try to console her it - it becomes heartbreaking."
He turned his face away and bent over the manuscript. Tears had come out of his own eyes, and were wetting his face. (p. 292)

It is a testament to von Arnim's skill that we feel Stephen's pain. Despite the fact that he is the solemn, conservative moral arbiter driving the action of the plot, there is no

³⁰ J. B. Priestley, *English Humour* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1976), p. 108.

³¹ Alison Hennegan notes that *Love* was published just two years after Edith Thompson and her lover, Frederick Bywaters, were hanged for the murder of Thompson's husband. The unacceptability of relationships between older women and younger men is evidenced by the fact that most acknowledged that Edith's most shocking crime had been to take a teenage lover. Hennegan, p. 101.

sense that he is merely an archetype, as might be considered generically typical of a comedy. Von Arnim is able to meet Priestley's criteria of the 'great humorist' who conjoins irony and affection, because, as the *Saturday Review* observed, 'her people are real, her sympathy with them is unawkwardly alert.'³² Stephen's suffering mirrors that of Catherine, as he is denied youth and love is withdrawn; after his cruelty to Catherine, it is both ironic and fitting that he should suffer in this way. This irony closely mirrors Thompson's theory: we can 'see the joke' at Stephen's expense, and yet are still 'hurt' by it.

Stephen is unable to bear the pain of his estrangement from Virginia, and decides that Catherine and Christopher must be invited to visit. His conversation with his mother offers the only moment of bleak, black humour in this sombre chapter.

"You really intend to have those shocking people here and whitewash them?" He looked at her a moment in silence, bringing his attention back to what she was saying.

"You talk as if they were outbuildings, mother," he said, with a faint, wretched smile.

"Outbuildings! Sepulchres," said Mrs Colquhoun. "Abodes of corruption. And nothing you can do will hide – will hide –" (p. 294-5)

It is the outbuildings, mundane and domestic, interposed on this highly-charged emotional scene that give a moment of humour: Stephen gives a very rare smile as in this moment of pain he finally perceives absurdity, and Mrs Colquhoun is tipped into hysteria.

Terence de Vere White argues that Stephen's 'moral collapse is an extraordinary development of the plot',³³ yet in terms of von Arnim's explorations of love, age and gender it is entirely logical. Stephen is an ironic mirror to Catherine: because he is a man he is allowed a happy marriage that has 'released him from the darkening prison of deepening middle age' (p. 289), while for Catherine 'it is unfair, unfair and most cruel, that at last she should have been given love only when she was too old' (p. 323).

Stephen suffers his own torment fearing he will lose his wife to whom he owes 'his

³² Gerald Gould, *Saturday Review*, 4 April 1925.

³³ De Vere White, p. 11.

return to youth' (p. 289). The symmetry between them allows von Arnim to critique the double standard, and create a structural irony within the novel.

Von Arnim struggled to finish the novel, rewriting the final chapter several times,³⁴ and White concludes that 'Elizabeth's authorial difficulties may well have arisen from finding that she had taken aboard a heavier cargo than her delicate vessel was constructed to carry'.³⁵ It is not really Stephen's 'collapse' that White finds problematic, but the change in tone. There is a mirroring between the characters and the narrative style; after Catherine ceases to laugh the reader also gradually ceases. Louis Bromfield, in a highly complimentary review, notes

the author at times displays a new and unaccountable turn away from her usual biting humor in the direction of genuine tragedy. There is something at once pitiful and bitterly ridiculous in the spectacle of Catherine seeking the aid of beauty doctors and quack rejuvenators in a heartrending attempt to destroy the truth and make of Christopher's lovesick illusions a reality.³⁶

These comments mirror those made about *Mr Skeffington*, and, to some extent *Vera*. Von Arnim's 'delicate vessel' of the expected romantic comedy takes an unexpected turn to 'genuine tragedy'. However, what is interesting about these critics' objections is that they are about the novel *before* the final tragic twist: Virginia, who has been pregnant throughout the novel, dies in childbirth. In my reading of the novel this is the 'genuine tragedy'; while the pain of Catherine's pursuit of youth is very real, it is, as in *Mr Skeffington*, eclipsed by much darker events.

Stephen's real collapse comes when Virginia is having her baby, and he is found moaning and shaking in the spare room. 'For Virginia's screams before the anaesthetist arrived, those awful, awful screams coming from his gentle wife, had sent the unhappy Stephen, after two hours of having to listen to them, out of his mind. He had killed her, he was her murderer, he had killed her, killed her with his love...' (p. 378). In this crisis, conventional behaviour is suspended, and hostility ceases: the previously unbending Mrs Colquhoun welcomes Catherine's arrival and invites her to "Call me

³⁴ De Charms, p. 274.

³⁵ De Vere White, p. 11.

³⁶ Louis Bromfield, 'Barriers Burned Away', *Saturday Review of Literature*, 11 April 1925.

Milly” (p. 375). However, at this time of tragedy, laughter re-emerges. Catherine thinks:

How strange it was, this night of fear spent stroking the Colquhouns. That queer imp that sits in a detached corner of one's mind refusing to be serious just when it most should be, actually forced her at this moment, when hope was at its faintest, to laugh inside herself at the odd turn her relationship with Stephen and his mother had taken. The collapsed Colquhouns; the towers of strength laid low; and she, the disapproved of, the sinner as Stephen thought, and perhaps he had told his mother and she thought it too, being their only support and comforter. The collapsed Colquhouns. It really was funny – very funny – very fun...

Why, what was this? She too crying? (p. 381)

A real crisis, ironically, has brought back Catherine's ability to laugh as she is forced to look beyond her own concerns. With her perspective drawn away from herself and her fears of aging, she can again see absurdity and irony. Her tears mirror the changing tone of the novel in these final chapters: laughter becomes very close to sadness. In the early chapters Catherine had, like the novel, laughed until she cried with hilarity; now she laughs until she cries with fear and misery.

With Virginia's death Catherine stops her artificial attempts to look young, and stands before Christopher with her face 'yellow' and her hair 'grizzled' (p. 400). Catherine has changed irrevocably, while Christopher remains the same: 'And there were no words she could have explained in. If she had tried, all she could have found to say, with perplexed brow, would have been, "But I *know*."' (p. 401). Catherine finally *is* knowing, but it is not a worldly, sophisticated knowledge, but a moral knowledge that compels a more truthful life without artifice. Christopher, however, thinks this epiphany caused by death is 'rot'.

"Oh Lord - women," he groaned, burying his face deeper, as if he could hide from his unhappiness. "Do you suppose I haven't been with death too, and seen it dozens of times? What do you think I was doing in the War? [...] I didn't throw away my silk handkerchiefs and leave off shaving because my friends died" (p. 405-6)

It is an excellent point, and a reminder that the exuberant and optimistic Christopher is of the generation of young men who experienced death on an unprecedented scale.

However, von Arnim has demonstrated that for Catherine the artifice has been a tyranny

of miserable lies, not the optional frivolity of silk handkerchiefs. Catherine offers to divorce Christopher, but they agree instead to take care of each other. A conjunction of fear and laughter ends the novel: 'And they both tried to laugh, but it was a shaky, uncertain laughter, for they were both afraid' (p. 408). Thus while comedy ebbs away and 'laughter is withered on the lips', the significance of laughter is reiterated until the end. The *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer, who had shuddered 'to think what a less sophisticated artist would have made of it' admires the ending's 'delicate touch'; 'the scene in which husband and wife meet and face the bitter truth is an extraordinarily felicitous piece of writing; and it ends on a note of forlorn, chastened hope'.³⁷ The word 'bitter' recurs in the reviews. Louis Bromfield writes 'The book wavers a bit between a note of gaiety and one of bitterness, so that the reader is never quite certain how to take it; but always it moves along smoothly from the pen of one who knows how to write'.³⁸ Von Arnim, I would argue, has chosen the difficult route of attempting to write of bitterness with gaiety, and as such, in common with *Mr Skeffington*, the tone is sometimes uncertain. However, although death enters the romantic comedy here as it does in the 1940 novel, the two tragedies are not comparable, and this is reflected in the 'smoothness' of the ending. Virginia's death is a domestic tragedy, not the 'evil' of the Nazis, and von Arnim is able to retain her trope of laughter until the very end.

Bromfield's comment that the novel moves 'smoothly from the pen of one who knows how to write' highlights again the sense of von Arnim's technical skill as a writer. However, Bromfield knew that this quality was not universally valued in the literary climate of 1925, and he took the opportunity of this review of *Love* to consider the influence of particular taste-makers on the status of contemporary novels. He weighs in against 'bluestocking' readers who 'do not attempt at distinction along the lines of good or bad; rather all novels are classed as "serious and real" as against those which are "light"'. He continues:

Obviously if we were to follow these lines of judgement all of Congreve, "Joseph Andrews," most of Moliere, "Much Ado About Nothing," and endless other pieces of art would hastily be cast into the discard as "light," as "pot-boilers" which it was a shame for their authors to have written. By these means the writings of "Elizabeth" have come into many quarters to be looked upon widely as light stuff for ladies to read in hammocks under lilac

³⁷ Bullett, *TLS*, 26 March 1925, p. 220.

³⁸ Bromfield, *Saturday Review of Literature*, 11 April 1925.

bushes. Obviously this is nonsense. If one could by some means arrange it so that the quality of humor, a little tinged with spite, would be made contagious, the reviewer for one would gladly place some of our serious young writers where they might be exposed to "Elizabeth." A little leaven would help many a first novel over the stile.³⁹

He argues that Elizabeth is not light, yet it is her quality of humour that would provide 'leaven' - lightness - to the serious young novelist. The problem, I would argue, is not von Arnim's lightness. As many reviewers acknowledge, it takes immense technical skill to write a novel with her delightful lightness of tone. The problem, as Bromfield himself observes, is that for a novel to be 'light' in the 1920s is to be regarded as worthless, and worse, to be a shame to their authors.

The *Guardian* review also explicitly recognised that *Love*, with its 'delicate wit', was out of step with the 'modern novel'.

The title is, perhaps, deliberately a challenge and reproach to that distressing kind of modern novel which is so like a draught of Worcester sauce. This is cool sherbet, with delicate wit playing on the surface as water-flies whose tiny wakes are momentarily interlaced in filigree upon a pool. It makes cosy, pleasant reading [...]. All the simple things having been done in novels – only they haven't, choice is here made of a difficult case.⁴⁰

Implicit in this review is an indication of the paradoxical nature of von Arnim's novel: she has chosen a 'difficult case', yet it is not 'that distressing kind of modern novel'; instead, with its delicate wit, it manages to be 'cosy, pleasant reading'. Once again, von Arnim's novel is deceptive, concealing her dissections of real distress within the carapace of a 'glamorous comedy'.⁴¹

Elizabeth Taylor's *In a Summer Season* (1961)

Nearly forty years on, Taylor would find her sophisticated novel to be similarly out of step with the contemporary literary culture. *In a Summer Season* is the story of Kate, a 'recognisable Elizabeth Taylor heroine', who like Catherine is middle-aged and upper-

³⁹ Bromfield, *Saturday Review of Literature*, 11 April 1925.

⁴⁰ *Guardian*, 3 April 1925

⁴¹ *Guardian*, 3 April 1925.

middle-class, has servants and very little to do.⁴² Again like Catherine, her first marriage was companionable and ordinary, but her second marriage to a younger man greatly disrupts the *status quo*. Remarkably little appears to have changed between 1925 and 1961: these intelligent, capable women are still expected to wave their husbands off in the morning, send their children away to school, supervise the servants and lead essentially idle lives. They are also, as middle-aged women, expected to have quietly left passion and sexual feelings behind. Taylor, characteristically, is more subtle than von Arnim: Kate's husband Dermot is only 10 years younger than herself, rather than the 22 years between Catherine and Christopher. For Kate to marry Dermot is not the dramatic scandal of Catherine's marriage, and no one mistakes Kate for Dermot's mother. However, interestingly both novelists shortened the age gap they might originally have considered: von Arnim took the 30 years between herself and Frere down to 22 years for Catherine and Christopher; Taylor wrote 'in the year when she left school he was born' in an earlier draft of *Summer Season* but later reduced this 17 years to 10.⁴³ Yet Kate's marriage remains unsuitable.

From Tom in *Palladian* (1946), to Vesey in *A Game of Hide and Seek* (1951) and Esme in *Angel* (1957), Taylor created a gallery of flawed, feckless men; Dermot is another portrait in this mould. He is charming and attractive, with a brogue voice inherited from his Irish father. This Irish ancestry is scathingly identified as a pose by Taylor: 'religious feeling came in with the Irish accent, was put on quickly like a false moustache'.⁴⁴ The unsuitability of this marriage is compounded by Dermot's inability to perform the expected male role: Kate cannot wave him off on the commuter train as he is unemployed, and they live instead on Kate's capital, for Dermot has none. He is continually humiliated by his mother's schemes to find him work, and finds self respect only in his love for Kate. Dermot did not, as many suspect, marry Kate for her money; instead his love for her is his redeeming quality and his 'chief pride' (p. 31). Like

⁴² Susannah Clapp, Introduction to Elizabeth Taylor, *In a Summer Season* (London: Virago, 1983), p. v.

⁴³ Nicola Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor* (London: Persephone Books, 2009) p. 279. Despite Taylor's attempt at subtlety, Nicola Beauman has suggested that the character of Dermot is based on David Blakely, who was murdered by Ruth Ellis. He lived in Penn, and Taylor knew him and his family well. For the novel to be linked with a notorious murder by an older woman, as *Love* was with Edith Thompson and Frederick Bywaters, suggests the highly transgressive nature of these relationships. However, it must be noted that Beauman includes in her account a statement by Taylor's daughter: 'David was certainly not the person Dermot was based on'. Beauman, p. 278-9.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Taylor, *In a Summer Season* (1961; London: Virago, 1983), p. 33. Subsequent references will be in parenthesis in the text.

Catherine, until had fallen in love ‘he had never known anxiety. Now he was afraid of happenings from which he would not recover’ (p. 32).

In this novel we are not told the story of Dermot and Kate’s romance (except indirectly, through the memories of others), since the novel begins a year into the marriage. Kate’s age and attitude are established in the opening sentence of the novel, as she stands at the door of her mother-in-law’s house: “‘After all, I am not a young girl to be intimidated by her,” Kate decided’ (p. 9). She is unwilling to be cast in the role of subservient young wife, and over the ensuing lunch establishes her character: the *trompe-l’oeil* panel in her mother-in-law Edwina’s house ‘doesn’t trompe *my* oeil’; Edwina’s romanticised account of her marriage in which she ‘was just a little bored sometimes in the evenings’ inspires a satirical response in Kate’s thoughts: ‘Harrods being closed’ (p. 9, 13). This is a very different character from Catherine, whose laughter, while relishing absurdity, was never cynical. Although middle-aged, Catherine was characterised by a kind of innocence that formed a contrast with von Arnim’s more sophisticated, knowing comedic voice. Kate, however, like Julia in *At Mrs Lippincote’s*, is immediately established as a satirist.

Kate can be read as a character that more closely mirrors the narrator. In a letter Kate’s Aunt Ethel observes that Kate is ‘a typically *English* woman, I should say – young for her age, rather inhibited (heretofore), too satirical, with one half of her mind held back always to observe and pass judgement’ (p. 148). In this letter Taylor makes a typically self-reflexive manoeuvre: we recognise the truth of Ethel’s judgement of Kate, while Taylor demonstrates the very same detached judgement in her own satirical account of Ethel’s letter. It is this viewpoint, as well as the character’s situation that makes Kate a ‘recognisable Elizabeth Taylor heroine’; like Julia in *At Mrs Lippincote’s* she is able to see absurdity, to ironise and to laugh. This does not mean that Kate is Taylor’s mouth-piece however; Kate is herself subject to Taylor’s scrupulous observation and judgement. Intriguingly, Ethel’s notion of the ‘typical English woman’ introduces a sense of community and commonality; if Kate is typical, rather than unique, are there attitudes of satire and detachment characteristics which are expected to be shared by character, novelist and reader?

Ethel also proposes that Kate is 'rather inhibited (heretofore)'. For the Kate of *Summer Season* is not inhibited; with her second marriage to Dermot, like Catherine she enters a sexually passionate relationship, entirely unlike her first, companionate marriage. This is, as Susannah Clapp observes, 'Elizabeth Taylor's sexiest novel'.⁴⁵ In *Love*, von Arnim contented herself with the comic observations of Catherine's housekeeper, Mrs Mitcham, to convey the sexual passion of Catherine and Christopher's relationship: she is 'shocked' at the chiffon nightgowns that 'you could see through as plain as daylight', and with Catherine staying in bed later and later 'she couldn't help feeling [...] that there was something unbecoming in this turning of day into night' (p. 278-9). *Summer Season*, in contrast, enters both the bedroom and the sexual feelings of Kate. In this scene Kate has been sitting in the garden, prosaically sewing:

He drew her shoulders back against him and slid his hands inside her thin shirt. At once, she dropped her sewing into her lap and closed her eyes, hit unexpectedly by vertigo, by desire. For a second, pressing her head back hard against him, she wildly thought that she must have him take her, there, at that moment – with the house in view, Ethel at an upstairs window perhaps, Mrs Meacock tripping out for some mint, or the gardener returning for something he had forgotten; but the extreme sensation, when it had seemed to swing her dizzily into the air, dropped her again. She felt weak, as hollow as an empty shell, and he counted her heartbeat settling slowly to its usual pace. (p. 152)

Love and *Summer Season* are both daring novels in their dissections of aging, sexuality and female identity, but here Taylor is able to do what von Arnim could not: describe a woman's sexual desire explicitly. Curiously, this attracted little comment in contemporary reviews, despite the recent trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* under the 1959 Obscene Publications Act, which had made the depiction of sexuality in fiction the subject of widespread debate. It appears that Taylor's chosen milieu of the middle-classes in the Thames Valley renders these sexual scenes invisible or untroubling to most reviewers. The *Times Literary Supplement*, after reviewing a 'difficult' novel, writes that in comparison 'with Mrs. Elizabeth Taylor we are safe – safe in the Home Counties somewhere between Mrs. Dale's Diary and glossy magazines and with Mrs. Miniver hovering in the background'.⁴⁶ In this land of feminine domestic safety, a sex scene might be, as Siriol Hugh-Jones observed of a woman directing the 1961 *Beyond*

⁴⁵Clapp, p. v.

⁴⁶'Worlds Apart', *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 May 1961, p. 297.

the Fringe, 'so unexpected as to slip the mind altogether'.⁴⁷ Despite the evidence to the contrary, the *TLS* reviewer persists in seeing *Summer Season* as a safe, rather old-fashioned novel. It is not until 1983 that a reviewer explicitly commented on these scenes: Joy Grant asks 'has any other woman described women's sexual feeling with such easy frankness, exactitude, and lyrical intensity?'⁴⁸ Yet it is precisely this 'lyrical intensity' which, with her Thames Valley setting, appears to damn Taylor as a particular kind of unthreatening novelist, who can be quickly summarised and dismissed. The *TLS* review continues: 'we are also invited once again to be lyrical or, if that is too much for us, at least to be sensitive'.⁴⁹ The clear implication is that this is a retrograde novel, both in its setting, and its style.

However, as Neil Reeve perceptively observes, Dermot 'offers Kate the exhilaration of the new, an erotic agitation whose deepest component may be the sense of release from all the customs and protocols on which she always believed her happiness depended'.⁵⁰ Their relationship is a long way from the companionate marriage she had with Alan, with its shared enjoyment of chamber music, novel reading and country walks; with Dermot in fact, she appears to share very little except love. This is not a novel of reassuring stasis, as the *TLS* claims; on the contrary, Reeve argues that: 'the whole of Kate and Dermot's relationship seems to belong to a broader context of iconoclastic modernization. All around there are house-refurbishments, clearings-out, bulldozers, jumble sales, the stirrings of a cult of youth.'⁵¹ Yet these very changes create parallels between von Arnim's 1925 novel and *Summer Season*. There was a similar 'cult of youth' in the 1920s compounding Catherine's struggles, and while Kate had 'been tempted to try to appear much younger than she was, but early recognised this for the trap it must always be', nevertheless, like Catherine the 'fear that he should ever regret [marrying her] shadowed her self confidence' (p. 38). Despite the upheavals of the early 1960s, there is a sense that very little has changed for women. Sitting on the train, watching the business men pouring out on to the platform and hurrying home to their waiting wives, Kate too wonders 'was it what life should be? [...] It seemed so very little, although this girl sitting opposite her – she had forgotten her name again – was

⁴⁷ Siriol Hugh-Jones, 'We Witless Women', *The Twentieth Century*, vol 170, July 1961, p. 22.

⁴⁸ Joy Grant, 'Unhappy Valley', *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 July 1983.

⁴⁹ *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 May 1961, p. 297.

⁵⁰ N. H. Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2008), p. 59.

⁵¹ Reeve, p. 60.

clearly desperate to achieve [marriage], was now dabbing her face with powder as part of the campaign' (p. 21). This is, in some senses, a novel about relentless modernisation, as Reeve argues, but it pessimistically portrays women's roles as disappointingly static. And a consideration of *Love* also reminds us that what is modern – the emerging 1960s 'cult of youth' - is not necessarily new, and may be merely cyclical.

For a middle-aged woman to have a passionate relationship with a younger man is still disturbing and disruptive. All those around Kate and Dermot expect the marriage to fail, and they cause 'much conjecture in bar parlours' (p. 105). Kate is defined, as Catherine was, by her relationships with others, and sexual passion is still seen as incompatible with being a middle-aged wife and mother. Nicola Beauman argues that 'If the question is – can, should, a woman have a fulfilled sexual existence once she is over 40? – the answer, Elizabeth apparently believed, is that she should not'.⁵² Beauman's evidence for this is that there are no passionate marriages in her novels; people marry instead for security, companionship or status. However, this does not mean that Taylor held the view that women *should* not have sexually fulfilled lives, only that it is thus in the society she so clear-sightedly observes. Taylor is always unflinching, depicting the lives of her Thames valley characters as she saw them to be, rather than as she might wish them to be in a happier world. As Isabel Patterson observes of *Love*, 'It is a cruelly truthful piece of work, the more so because the author is so gentle in her method. These are all nice people; they aren't mean, or vicious, or illbred, or bad-tempered; and they suffer because it can't be helped. It is so'.⁵³

The presence of Kate's Aunt Ethel in the household also demonstrates how little opportunities for women have improved: like Eleanor in *At Mrs Lippincote's*, and many characters in Jane Austen's novels, she is an aging single woman who lives as a dependent, in another person's house. Ethel is all too aware of her position: 'every evening Ethel struggled upstairs with her 'cello and music-stand, for it was a part of the parasite's code not to litter up other people's houses with one's things' (p. 37). Taylor juxtaposes Ethel's going up to bed with the scene in Dermot and Kate's bedroom. These are two visions of aging: Kate's day will end with love-making, while Ethel has only a

⁵² Beauman, p. 321-2.

⁵³ Isabel Patterson, 'The Price of Love', *The New York Herald Tribune Books*, 5 April 1925, p. 8.

throw-away compliment from Dermot to take to bed. 'To this there would be some tart reply, but she would keep his remark in mind for later and bring it out in the solitude of her bedroom and enjoy it privately, like a biscuit saved from tea' (p. 38). This sentence demonstrates again the layers to be enjoyed in Taylor's prose: the observation itself is painfully acute – these are the very small pleasures that exist in Ethel's life to be hoarded – and the metaphor of the biscuit so apposite, as we can well imagine this as another of the tiny treats that Ethel parsimoniously stores for herself. On another level the sentence also describes the experience of the reader, who may find the precision of this sentence itself something to be remembered and savoured. However, the juxtaposition with Kate does not serve merely to expose Ethel's loneliness in old age; in the other room Kate is unhappily 'reflecting on the hazards of having married a husband so much younger than herself' (p. 38).

This is a novel in which people are continually observed: in the garden with Dermot, Kate imagines having sex with 'the house in view, Ethel at an upstairs window perhaps, Mrs Meacock tripping out for some mint' (p. 152). (Surely not what the *TLS* reviewer had in mind when he imagined 'Mrs Miniver hovering in the background'.) Taylor considered 'The Chorus', 'Two with Chorus' and 'The Commentators' among her possible titles; as Nicola Beauman notes, there is a strong sense in the novel that Kate and Dermot's relationship would have stood a better chance 'removed from their watchful audience' (p. 105).⁵⁴ Ethel, like Eleanor in *At Mrs Lippincote's*, and the housekeeper in *Love*, provides a comic commentary on the couple: 'One of Ethel's greatest pleasures was letter-writing, and she looked forward to composing, later in the day, a long analysis of her niece's marriage to send to Gertrude. It would be as minutely observed as if she were Richard Jefferies describing a hedgerow' (p. 48).⁵⁵ Taylor, like Jane Austen, uses letters as an opportunity for satire, and she is particularly scathing on the letter-writing habits of the lonely. This is a witty jibe at Ethel's fascination with something she is ill-equipped to understand, but it might also be a description of Taylor's novel; although it is done obliquely, Taylor's depiction of Kate and Dermot is characteristically 'minutely observed'. They are revealed to us, piece by piece, in the commentary of others, in remarks made in passing, and conversations overheard.

⁵⁴ Beauman, p. 320.

⁵⁵ (John) Richard Jefferies (1848-1887) was known for his writing about nature and the English countryside. See the Richard Jefferies Society <www.richardjefferiessociety.co.uk> [accessed 6 December 2010].

Already observed by Ethel, Kate's children Tom and Lou, and the cook Mrs Meacock, Dermot and Kate's relationship is subject to further scrutiny with 'The Return of the Thorntons', as Taylor titled the second section of the novel. The Thorntons are Charles, the widower of Kate's best friend who died several years earlier, and his now adult daughter Araminta, described by Susannah Clapp as 'a maddening vision of icy deliciousness, with her false eyelashes, exiguous shift dresses, over-candid talk of lavatories, and Continental poise'.⁵⁶ Both are highly disruptive. Charles brings with him memories of Kate's first husband, Alan, and then himself becomes a subject of a disturbing erotic dream that further unsettles Kate. Araminta personifies the 'cult of youth' that is emerging. This is not an innocent youth; Araminta is a sophisticate: aloof, exciting, caring nothing for convention, and Tom immediately falls in love with her.

There are several dreadful, and dreadfully funny meal-time scenes, and the presence of Charles and Araminta precipitates one of the worst. (I presume this is the one that Anne Tyler is referring to when she writes that 'there's a wealth of hilarious scenes, including what must be literature's most mismatched dinner party', although there is another contender in this novel.⁵⁷) Reviews and criticism of Taylor often include the disclaimer that to attempt to convey the quality of her writing through short quotations is impossible; as Rosemary Dinnage observes, Taylor 'does not go in for the kind of "special" passages that are quotable – the texture of her wit is too fine, her irony too lightly and continuously in play'.⁵⁸ This scene, over ten pages, is a case in point. Taylor passes in and out of the consciousness of her characters, demonstrating over and over the frequently comic discrepancy between what is said, and what is really thought or felt. Araminta arrives wearing a silk dress so tight that in order to pass water she reveals she is 'bolted in the W.C. for hours and hours' and consequently measures appraisingly the size of the drinks Dermot keeps offering her (p. 123). Tom, dabbing at spilt sherry on her front, 'brushed against the softness of her stomach, warm under the thin silk. "My God, she's got nothing on underneath," he thought, and felt faint' (p. 124). Lou realizes that her family have forgotten that it is her last night before returning to school, a night on which there were traditionally no guests, and dinner is 'cottage pie and

⁵⁶ Clapp, p. vi.

⁵⁷ Anne Tyler, 'The Other Elizabeth Taylor', *Book World - The Washington Post*, 21 August 1983, p. 1

⁵⁸ Rosemary Dinnage, 'The tick of blood in the wrist', *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 September 1976, p. 1096.

tomato sauce out of a bottle' (p. 126). It is a small thought, a clue Taylor leaves of Kate's neglect of her maternal role in her preoccupation with the sexual tensions among Dermot, Charles and Araminta.

The awkwardness peaks when Kate mentions a mutual acquaintance, Lady Asperley, whom she and Charles likened, in the past, to 'Mrs Gereth':

"Who blushes?" Dermot asked.

"Mrs Gereth," said Charles.

"May Asperley," Kate added quickly. *The Spoils of Poynton* meant nothing to Dermot, and since Alan died she had half forgotten the name they had once given to their friend.

"We have always thought her so much like Mrs Gereth," Charles explained.

"I've never met Mrs Gereth," Dermot said. [...]

Now Kate was blushing, Charles noticed. "I could never have married a man who didn't simply dote on Jane Austen or Henry James," she had said years ago. Alan had been the most satisfactory devotee and often talked of Donwell and Pemberley and Poynton – their aspect, the soil on which they had stood, the position they commanded – as if he had just recently been staying at them.
(p. 127)

Crucially, this scene is one of shared understanding, as well as misunderstanding. Not only does Charles share with Kate the knowledge of Henry James's novel, but now, as Kate does not enlighten Dermot, he is intimately aware of her distress. He notices her blush, knows why she blushes, and simultaneously knows that she knows he has noticed. Neel Mukherjee terms this 'reactive interiority', in which people think of what others are thinking and react to that, rather than to what is said.⁵⁹ It might also be seen as a demonstration of 'psychical accord': not only does Charles know the novel, but shares in what it has meant to Kate, and shares her subsequent embarrassment. Alan was clearly a very engaged reader, enjoying with Kate a pleasurable over-identification with what they read, a characteristic that Humble identifies with the 'ideal middlebrow woman reader'.⁶⁰ Dermot could not possibly compete, and all these layers of unspoken communication exclude him far more than merely not having heard of a character in a book. This exclusion differs from that of Roddy in *At Mrs Lippincote's*, who 'never knew' Catherine Morland; that was a joke for Julia and the reader that passed without

⁵⁹ Neel Mukherjee, 'A Fiendish Mood: The mid-century novels of "the other Elizabeth Taylor"', *Boston Review*, Jan/Feb 2008; 33, 1, p. 40.

⁶⁰ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 178.

interior commentary, as Julia intended to expose Roddy as non-reading and lacking 'psychical accord'. Kate, in contrast, is painfully aware that Dermot is already insecure, and wants to protect him from further hurt. It would have better to have simply laughed and explained that 'Mrs Gereth' was a character in a book, but in her attempt to avoid humiliation she has in fact increased it, storing up for Dermot the later angry discovery that 'they had preferred to gloss over his ignorance' (p. 147).

When Dermot and Kate began their relationship they had, like Catherine and Christopher, laughed together. In Lou's account 'they were in love even before Father died. She always seemed excited and laughed a lot when Dermot came to the house, which he didn't very often, as I'm sure my father disliked him, and who could blame him, if he did?' (p. 60). Indeed Lou feels aggrieved at what she recognises as the disruptive effect of Dermot's laughter: 'he had laughed at many another solemn ritual, broken through imprisoning habits, not questioning who had begun them' (p. 29). Now, with the return of the Thorntons, there is less and less laughter, and more embarrassment as the shadow of Kate's previous life intrudes into the new marriage. When Dermot begins an ill-fated job in London Kate's attempt at tactful encouragement fails dismally: "I shall come down to meet you at the station and feel a real suburban wife again." Her last word was ill-chosen and she would have liked to have snapped it off as she snapped off a piece of cotton between her teeth.' (p. 154) Although Kate has in the main managed to resist the temptation to try and appear younger than she is, age and experience must still be denied; tact demands she does not mention that she has done all this before. *Summer Season* suggests that it is not possible to truly 'make a new start'. There will always be the knowledge of what has gone before pressing upon the present, and worse, 'the present time was nothing if it could not last or come again: in fact, it scarcely existed' (p. 197).

As the hot summer ends, Kate and Dermot's marriage begins to disintegrate. Kate finds out that Dermot's job in London failed, and he has been spending the day idling in London and coming home on the commuter train rather than admit the truth. This is deeply upsetting to Kate: 'the childishness of his deception was so full of pathos that she felt tears rising in her eyes' (p. 212), but there is worse to come. Despite Taylor's self-confessed preference for novels in which 'practically nothing ever happens',

Summer Season ends, like *Palladian*, and *Love*, with sudden death.⁶¹ Dermot has been in a car accident with Araminta, and both die. When they return from the hospital Kate opens Dermot's briefcase: there is nothing in it but a 'newspaper and her own copy of *The Spoils of Poynton* with a bus ticket between the pages to mark a place. "He didn't get very far," she thought' (p. 220). In discovering his betrayal of her, she also learns that he had discovered her own humiliation of him.

In a perfunctory coda, Kate marries Charles. With Dermot she had chosen sexual love, considered entirely inappropriate at her age; instead she should be with Charles, with whom she shares the proper psychological accord: the shared love for Henry James, and the shared history. As Reeve suggests, the novel 'sets sensibilities formed in the 1930s struggling to adjust to 1960' and with this marriage Kate and Charles have a companion who shares this sensibility and can face the challenge together.⁶² This conclusion is all very neat. However, as Elizabeth Janeway observes, this 'incontrovertible solution is given us, but seen past, and adjudged [...] we are reminded that survival is not everything. This is the way life works out, says Taylor, in the world as it is, and she is right, there's no doubt about it'.⁶³ There is a certain resignation about both *Summer Season* and *Love*; Taylor and von Arnim point out the absurdities and cruelties of aging for these women, exposing them for the societal constructs they are, but there is no wish fulfilment and happy ending, only unflinching realities.

In this comedy of age, the younger people are consistently self-involved, while Kate, with her maturity and experience, is attuned to what others are thinking and feeling. Susannah Clapp suggests that Kate 'is in touch with more of the feelings of those surrounding her than anyone else, and because of this, more given both to irony and its alternative, embarrassment'.⁶⁴ Clapp explicitly recognises that irony is a product of involvement in emotional life, not an attitude of intellectual detachment. As I argue of von Arnim, the ironic perspective is a subtle combination of both feeling and detachment; it is, in A. R. Thompson's terms, both emotional and intellectual. Tellingly,

⁶¹ Elizabeth Taylor, *The New York Herald Tribune*, 11 October 1953. Taylor's novels often end with death or intimations of death: *A Wreath of Roses* (1949) begins with a suicide and ends with the realisation that Richard is a murderer; in *A Game of Hide and Seek* (1951) Vesey is left ill and 'marked for death'; and in *The Soul of Kindness* (1964) Flora drives Kit to attempt suicide.

⁶² Reeve, p. 42.

⁶³ Elizabeth Janeway, 'How Things Work Out', *New York Times Book Review*, 22 January 1961, p. 26

⁶⁴ Clapp, p. vii.

in Ethel's description, it is only *half* her mind that Kate holds back to 'observe and pass judgement'. Rosemary Dinnage argues that Taylor has

a style of consistent, steely elegance, formidable and concentrated: with a flawless attention to the moment, to the "tick of blood in the wrist", the sudden tiny holes in time. Her characters [...] tend to be of two kinds: those who know how to listen to that ticking, how to be amazed and amused and to feel pain; and the others, who do not pay quite enough attention. They take short cuts, and rather more often cause, rather than feel pain.⁶⁵

It is in this sense that Kate is 'too satirical', as Ethel described her: her insight and attitude put her among those who will feel pain, rather than inflict it. This insight may be desirable in a novelist, but the character of Kate suggests that in 'life', this understanding may be painful. As Mukherjee observes of Taylor's novels, 'awareness of other people's interiorities is not necessarily a salve or even redemptive; people still remain marooned on their isolated islands'.⁶⁶ While Kate reconnects with Charles she loses touch with Dermot, and in the end is unaware that Dermot is lying to her about his job, and is pursuing Araminta.

Von Arnim and Taylor share a sensibility which is simultaneously tender, intimately involved and detached. Isabel Patterson, in suggesting the inevitability of the suffering of the characters in *Love*, argues that "Elizabeth" is the only author writing in English who could face the fact with such absolute, Olympian detachment', but this detachment is not absolute.⁶⁷ Like Taylor she gives us the world as she sees it to be, with the 'tender ruthlessness' for which Taylor is praised.⁶⁸ Reeve suggests that Taylor's 'narrative tone' contains elements of her friends Elizabeth Bowen and Ivy Compton-Burnett, combining 'the intensely romantic sensibility of the one with the other's caustic stripping of pretension; the mixture produces a kind of compassionate ruthlessness'.⁶⁹ This mirrors very closely Hammill's conception of a 'dynamic opposition between romantic sentiment and worldly disillusionment' that is typical of the early twentieth-century sophisticated text,⁷⁰ yet in the 1950s the praise for it came with a rather dismissive

⁶⁵ Dinnage, p. 1096.

⁶⁶ Mukherjee, p. 41.

⁶⁷ Patterson, p. 8.

⁶⁸ Hugh Fausset, 'New Novels' *Guardian*, 20 March 1953, p. 4.

⁶⁹ N. H. Reeve, 'Elizabeth Taylor', *The Literary Encyclopedia*, <<http://litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=4326>> [Accessed 5 August 2008].

⁷⁰ Hammill, p. 114.

caveat: Taylor's characters are 'defly drawn, with the unmalicious wit and humour, the tender ruthlessness with which admirers of Mrs Taylor's prose will be gratefully familiar. This is certainly as enchanting, in its distinctive feminine mode, as any of them'.⁷¹ Taylor's technique is contained as a 'distinctive feminine mode', rather than whole-heartedly approved. This implicit dismissal had developed by the 1961 publication of *Summer Season* into an explicit disapprobation. Norman Shrapnel, in a review tellingly entitled 'Lady's-eye-view', writes in the *Guardian*: 'Save me – so every hardened reviewer must say to himself in his more churlish moods – from the wise, witty, sensitive, accomplished, charming female novelist.'⁷² Von Arnim and Taylor do indeed have all these qualities, but while in 1925 they were also explicitly identified as feminine, in the main they were not used as terms to dismiss or belittle. On the contrary, Bromfield approves 'the shrewdness which seems to be the gift of feminine writers and is never quite attained by men'.⁷³

By 1961, the reviews suggest, this mature, sophisticated comedy is no longer welcome. Offering a metaphor for the mood of literature at this time, Shrapnel continues: 'Mrs Taylor has so much to offer that it is probably underbred to feel that way about her civilised book, like being given old Madeira in the walled garden of a Chelsea villa and wanting to slough off and drink bitter up the Fulham Road.'⁷⁴ The meaning of sophistication had itself changed considerably since the 1920s: Hammill suggests that if the interwar years can be seen as the Age of Sophistication, 'by the fifties and sixties, sophistication was already beginning to be associated as much with history as with modernity'.⁷⁵ Thus while von Arnim was out of step with the modernist novel in the 1920s, her sophistication *was* modern, whereas by the 1950s and 60s this kind of sophistication was old-fashioned and associated with nostalgia, at a time when literary critics were looking for raw newness. As Kate observes in *Summer Season* 'charm – or what that word had once meant – was now an old-fashioned quality' (p. 120).

Norman Shrapnel's article goes on to review *A Quality of Mercy* by Paul West, which he describes as 'pretentious, overambitious, gloomy, violent, even absurd. [...] Certainly

⁷¹ Fausset, *Guardian*, 20 March 1953, p. 4.

⁷² Norman Shrapnel, 'Lady's-eye-view', *Guardian*, 28 April 1961.

⁷³ Bromfield, *Saturday Review of Literature*, 11 April 1925.

⁷⁴ Shrapnel, *Guardian*, 28 April 1961.

⁷⁵ Hammill, p. 166.

no success, like Mrs Taylor's. Yet one cannot get away from the thought that it is in strange corners like this, rather than in the well-tended garden, that new growth for the novel has to be sought'.⁷⁶ Shrapnel's view is indicative of the emergence in the 1950s of the 'Angry Young Men', whose aim was to 'slough off' the old certainties, and for whom Taylor's 'civilised' novel would have no appeal. The 'Angry Young Men' did not constitute a coherent movement, but two characteristics were obvious: this was the voice of working class or lower-middle-class men. Taylor is thus excluded by both class and gender, and these aspects of her identity are intrinsically associated with her style and technique. Richard Mayne, in the *New Statesman*, wrote:

Elizabeth Taylor can be relied upon for skill and dexterity, laced with wit and capable of 'tea-table' tragedy, in case one feels that it's all gauze and gossamer. That, I'm afraid, is my predominant feeling – less a literary judgment than a confession of brutish dislike for gracious upper-middle-class charm, at least in novels.⁷⁷

In 1958 Leslie A. Fiedler wrote that the young British writer defines himself 'against the class he replaces: against the ideal of "Bloomsbury," [...] he is boorish rather than well-behaved, rudely angry rather than ironically amused, [...] philistine rather than arty'.⁷⁸ Bloomsbury is now the establishment to be broken with, just as the Bloomsburries themselves intended to break with the 'materialists' in the 1920s. Taylor, however inaccurately, is regarded as a part of this safe establishment, well-behaved, ironically amused, and arty. It is highly ironic for Taylor, who was not regarded as in any sense modernist to be associated with this establishment, and consequently dismissed as out of step. What these reviews reveal is that in the 1920s, while comparisons with 'serious young novelists' are made, von Arnim is still appreciated for her own qualities, whereas in the 1950s and 60s for Taylor this comparison can negate all appreciation. The British reviewers of *Summer Season* would never find her subject matter 'so painful that one shudders to think what a less sophisticated artist would have made of it', for her sophistication is fatally associated with a safe middle-class femininity that obscures her dissection of pain.

⁷⁶ Shrapnel, *Guardian*, 28 April 1961.

⁷⁷ Richard Mayne, *New Statesman*, 28 April 1961.

⁷⁸ Leslie A. Fiedler, 'The un-Angry Young Men', *Encounter* 10, 1 (January 1958), p. 9, quoted in Florence Leclercq, *Elizabeth Taylor* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), p. 2.

Conclusion

My analysis of the reviews of von Arnim's and Taylor's novels demonstrates that from the 1920s through to the 1960s – despite all the changes in literary movements and fashions that occurred in these years – they have consistently been regarded as out of step with critically valued literature. There are hints of it in Katherine Mansfield's review of von Arnim's 1919 novel *Christopher and Columbus*, as she compliments von Arnim's incisive prose: 'All that she wants she can convey with a comment – at a stroke. There is a whole volume for one of our psychological authors in Mr. Twist's quarrel with his mother; she dismisses it in a little chapter.'¹ In making this comparison with 'our psychological authors', Mansfield perceived that von Arnim might now be out of step in a changing literary climate.

These comparisons were not always belittling; on the contrary, many reviewers compared von Arnim favourably with the new generation of critically acclaimed writers. In 1925, as I discussed in the previous chapter, Louis Bromfield recommended that 'serious young writers' could learn from her quality of humour;² similarly, a review of *Father* (1931) suggested that von Arnim has a 'sly, enchanting kind of humour, an effortless felicity of style which the younger generation would do well to envy'. Furthermore, the reviewer contends, 'if this were Elizabeth's first novel, scores of bright young critics would be patting themselves on the back for making a new literary discovery'.³ As it was, the categorisation of von Arnim's novels as 'light' as opposed to a category of 'serious and real' books that Bromfield protested against in 1925 was to continue for the rest of von Arnim's career. The dominance of this categorisation is evident in the way that many reviews take the form of comparison and defence. In a review of von Arnim's final novel *Mr Skeffington* in 1940, John Mair notes:

It is difficult to convey in a review the subtle and elusive charm of *Mr Skeffington*. A distinguished critic suggests "Edwardian" as the book's indicative epithet, and it does convey Elizabeth's leisured sophistication, as well as implying the blind over-detachment of her aristocratic characters. Rather rudely, one might describe Fanny as an isolated, self-analytical Mrs Minniver [sic], but one so indubitably out of the top layer of the very topmost drawer that even Mr

¹ Katherine Mansfield, 'Two Novels of Worth', *The Athenaeum*, 11 April 1919.

² Louis Bromfield, *Saturday Review of Literature*, 11 April 1925.

³ *Forum*, June 1931.

Forster would forbear to sneer. *Mr Skeffington* is sentimental: that is, it is a novel of feeling, as distinct from reason or physical emotion. It is a book with a conventional moral, it suspects rather than explores psychological depths, and will not, one imagines, appeal to the younger students of the Serious Novel. It is, however, a very careful and clever piece of work, and reminds us that novel-writing can still be one of the fine arts.⁴

This review gives a sense of the intricacies of the cultural hierarchies current at this time: Fanny is from the 'top layer of the very topmost drawer', and hence even the formidable 'Mr Forster would forbear to sneer', though the book will still not appeal to 'younger students of the Serious Novel' – a category so dominant as to merit capital letters. Yet it appears from this review that it is von Arnim's very skill in novel-writing that marks her apart from her more 'important' contemporaries, if her novel is necessary to 'remind us that novel-writing can still be one of the fine arts'. This review also demonstrates the changing connotations of 'sophistication'. In Chapter 4 I suggested that by the 1961 publication of Taylor's *In a Summer Season* sophistication had become associated with the past, but this review shows this association to be already made twenty years earlier, in 1940. Von Arnim's particular brand of sophistication is not considered to be indicative of the inter-war period, but points to an even earlier time, the Edwardian period when she first achieved popularity.

While *Mr Skeffington* was considered to be old-fashioned in form in 1940, Elizabeth Taylor's 1940s novels drew few overt comparisons with the 'Serious Novel'. Rosamond Lehmann noted briefly that *Palladian* (1946) was 'innocent of social realism'; the *New Yorker* observed that if *At Mrs Lippincote's* (1945) 'does not seem to some people as worthwhile as chronicling the growing pains of American youth or life among the homicidal inhabitants of the Georgia gullies, it is at least vastly more entertaining', but in the main her novels were not considered in relation to a supposed more important social realism, perhaps because of their more muted tone, in comparison to von Arnim's high comedy.⁵ In 1949 the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewers instead compared her positively to her contemporaries: 'if in a *A Wreath of Roses* she has not yet acquired the scope and the weight to put her on a level with illustrious older contemporaries she has confirmed her right to a high place among the after-war generation of novelists'.⁶ Yet Taylor herself certainly feared that she was out of step. In 1946 she wrote, 'At no other

⁴ John Mair, *New Statesman and Nation*, 27 January 1940.

⁵ Rosamond Lehmann, *The Listener*, 3 October 1946, p. 450; *New Yorker*, 13 April 1946.

⁶ 'Satire and Fiction', *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 April 1949, p. 229.

time would writers have fretted because they did not belong to their age. It is something which the Marxists have bred in us. There is no censorship so terrible'.⁷

It is in the 1950s and 1960s with the emergence of the 'Angry Young Men', as I discussed in Chapter 4, that British reviewers make highly dismissive comparisons between new movements in fiction and Taylor's novels. A 1965 reviewer of *A Dedicated Man and Other Stories* is forced to defend Taylor's work in terms similar to that of John Mair's review of *Mr Skeffington* in 1940:

Maybe these stories, so accurately set in a world which to a younger generation will seem both petty and ridiculous, so lulled in the mood and tempo of a society where appearances mattered and words said less than they implied, do not add up to a very exciting or urgent contribution to current fiction. But the smoothness of Mrs. Taylor's style and her patience in recreating tiny, valuable moments of truth show once again that she is among the most craftsmanlike of any English novelists now writing.⁸

However, while the nature of this review's defence is similar to that of Mair, the terms ('petty and ridiculous') are more critical. The levels of hostility that greeted Taylor's work in this period exceeded those faced by von Arnim at any stage of her career. The changing critical climate meant that von Arnim's reputation was also sinking at this time: a review of a television adaptation of *Mr Skeffington* in 1961, the same year that Taylor's *In a Summer Season* was published, complained 'There was a great deal of high life, butlers, servants, and large houses, and precious little reality. The author of "Mr Skeffington" was "Elizabeth" (of the "German Garden") and time has certainly not been kind to her story'.⁹ My research confirms Neil Reeve's contention that:

The dividing-line between highbrow and middlebrow culture, and the anxiety about cross-contamination, was actually rather less strictly marked in the 1920s and 30s than it was subsequently to become. Fiction reviewers in the 1950s and 60s, when they were not busily promoting the new agenda of class mobility and Angry Young Men, were tending to bemoan the provinciality and limited ambition of contemporary novelists, precisely by contrast with those now established as their great modernist predecessors.¹⁰

⁷ Nicola Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor* (London: Persephone Books, 2009), p. 161.

⁸ *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 July 1965, p. 553.

⁹ Mary Crozier, 'Television', *Guardian*, 17 May 1961, p. 7.

¹⁰ N. H. Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers Ltd, 2008), p. 3.

The concept of the middlebrow may have developed in the 1920s as a consequence of 'the coming to public consciousness of the modernist and associated avant-garde movements' as Nicola Humble argues,¹¹ but this processing of 'middlebrowsing' continues through the decades, and in fact gathered strength *after* the inter-war period. Virginia Woolf's influential essay 'Middlebrow', for example, was not published until 1942, therefore contributing to post-war, rather than inter-war thinking about culture. With the emergence of the 'Angry Young Men' Taylor, like von Arnim, is compared to a lauded avant-garde, but the derogatory meaning attached to this comparison becomes more serious. As Reeve suggests, 'the climate of reception for her kind of fiction was arguably chillier than any her older colleagues had had to endure'.¹² This climate was particularly unappreciative of Taylor's use of comedy. David L. Hirst, in his analysis of drama, sees a decisive shift in the late 1950s, with the emergence of a new wave of theatre: 'the vogue for realistic theatre with working class settings was even more antipathetic to the comedy of manners [than the decade following the Second World War]. In a period of earnest political and social commitment any undue concern with style was suspect'.¹³ It is a pity that both Niamh Baker's and Nicola Humble's exemplary studies end in 1960 given that these processes become more assertive rather than declining during the 1960s.¹⁴

The female middlebrow novel was, through its middle-class perspective, arguably more comprehensively excluded from the 'Angry Young Men' than it was from modernism, but both the 'Angries' and the modernists have in common that they are identified with masculinity. The critically valued movements may change over time, but they continue to be gendered male, and women are implicitly excluded. As Clare Hanson argues, 'the opposition between high and low culture is connected with the opposition between

¹¹ Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 11.

¹² Reeve, p. 3.

¹³ David L. Hirst, *Comedy of Manners* (London: Methuen and Co Ltd, 1979), p. 67.

¹⁴ This decline in Taylor's critical fortunes in the 1960s, however, is distinctively British: similar dismissive judgements were rarely made in America. This may be because the 'Angry Young Men' were a British phenomenon, and literary fashions in America did not follow the same trajectory. American literary culture, arguably, has always been less bound by literary hierarchies than Britain, and Taylor may have found a more appreciative audience in America specifically because of her particular brand of literary 'Englishness'. On the differing attitudes to literary hierarchies in the UK and US see Erica Brown and Mary Grover, 'Introduction', in *Literary Cultures and the Significance of the Middlebrow*, ed. by Brown and Grover (Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming 2011).

masculine and feminine: it is a *gendered* opposition'.¹⁵ The feminine middlebrow novel, however, is neither high nor low culture, but this position, Hilary Radner argues, contributes to its exclusion: the 'woman's middlebrow novel reproduces the position of the intellectual woman who has no place, but must shift from one place to another, who is forever "out of category"'. Radner continues:

This type of novel stubbornly rejects the status of high art. It is adamantly not "against interpretation" and demands to be understood in terms of its content. The woman's novel says, by and large, what it means to say, refusing to reveal its secrets under the scrutiny of the analyst by displaying these last for all to see, literati and nonliterati alike. On the other hand, the richness of its language, the subtlety of its arguments, and its undeniable intelligence and self-consciousness defy the classification of popular culture. The woman's novel may be read either as popular culture or as literature, reflecting the ambiguous social position of its preferred reader - the educated woman.¹⁶

In this thesis I have shown that von Arnim and Taylor's middlebrow novels do not display their 'secrets' for all to see. Much of their meaning is concealed by their use of comedy and irony. As feminist critics such as Regina Barreca have pointed out, comedy is not universal: 'almost every detail of our lives affects the way we create and respond to humour'.¹⁷ Through my analysis of Freud's theory of 'psychical accord' I have shown that the understanding of jokes requires a remarkably close relationship with the reader, who must have not only the necessary knowledge to perceive the joke, but also the same attitudes and repressions to share the joke. The seeing and not seeing, therefore, do not correspond to the 'literati and nonliterati', but, as Radner herself suggests, to a preferred educated female reader, and those who do not share her knowledge, attitudes and repressions. In these comedic feminine middlebrow novels it is therefore formal technique that controls the creation of much of the meaning; rather than demanding to 'be understood in terms of its content', these novels must be read with attention to form and style.

¹⁵ Clare Hanson, *Hysterical Fictions: The 'Woman's Novel' in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 79.

¹⁶ Hilary Radner, *Shopping Around: Feminine Culture and the Pursuit of Pleasure* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 105. An earlier version of this essay is also printed in Hilary Radner, 'Extra-Curricular Activities: Women Writers and the Readerly Text' in *Women's Writing in Exile*, ed. by Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

¹⁷ Regina Barreca, *Untamed and Unabashed: Essays on Women and Humour in British Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), p. 12.

Radner's analysis of the 'woman's novel' creates a dichotomy between a discourse of mastery (gendered male), reflected in the novels' intelligence, acuity of perception, and 'high' cultural references; and an 'identificatory mode' (gendered female) in which the reader gives herself over to the novel as a process, reading for the pleasure of the text.¹⁸ What my analysis of Taylor and von Arnim's novels has demonstrated is that this dichotomy is false. While these novels 'have it both ways' with, for example, the enjoyment of the romance form followed by its critique, the 'discourse of mastery' as Radner terms high culture, here is itself 'identificatory'. Clare Hanson utilises Radner's concepts in her analysis of *Palladian* to argue that 'as a woman's novelist, Taylor recognizes and incorporates *both* discourses', but I would argue that Taylor's novel does not contain two separate discourses. In *Palladian* the very 'pleasure in feeling' that Hanson identifies as part of a feminine 'low' culture, has to be read, in this complex novel, through a discourse of interpretation.¹⁹ The layers of irony and comedy in *Palladian* make the pleasures of this text the products of complex interactions and reconstructions by an identificatory reader.

Later in her study Hanson writes of Taylor: 'the move she makes in all her fiction, that of making the *feminine* the norm, making the feminine representative of the "the human", of the human condition. [...] is a profoundly radical move, with a wealth of possible implications',²⁰ and indeed, one of ways that Taylor does this is to make the 'mastery' of interpretation feminine. The analytical work of Taylor and von Arnim's novels is feminine, depending for its meaning on a specifically female interpretation. The significance of the woman as joker is signalled by the title of Susan Purdie's book *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse* (1993). She argues that

joking paradigmatically involves a discursive exchange whose distinctive operation involves the marked transgression of the Symbolic Law and whose effect is thereby to constitute jokers as 'masters' of discourse: as those able to break and to keep the basic rule of language, and consequently in controlling possession of full human subjectivity.²¹

¹⁸ Radner, p. 106.

¹⁹ Hanson, p. 79.

²⁰ Hanson, p. 93.

²¹ Susan Purdie, *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 5.

Mary Joannou observes that, 'for the male reader to read attentively such woman-centred texts as *The Weather in the Streets* or *Three Guineas* is to risk seeing his reflection in a distorting mirror, to find himself "other" and to submit to the kind of experience that in a patriarchal society has too often been the woman reader's'.²² Similarly, Taylor and von Arnim's comedic novels are truly woman-centred, with the woman as 'master of discourse': the masculine reader risks being only mildly amused, and wondering, as George Orwell did of *At Mrs Lippincote's*, what 'the meaning and purpose of the book' is.²³

Radner's analysis is based upon the literary culture of the interwar period (her 1989 essay contains several references to modernism which are omitted from the 1995 version), and the limitations of this understanding of the status of the middlebrow novel are evident when considered in the context of the post-war period. While in the interwar period the middlebrow novel can be compared unfavourably with the avant-garde novel that requires mastery, by the 1950s supposedly straight-forward, honest and powerful writing is valued, and those elements that require interpretive mastery (including the wit, irony, subtlety and sophistication of the feminine middlebrow novel), are not. Taylor can therefore be regarded, however inaccurately, as part of the literary establishment of 'arty' novels requiring attentive interpretation that the young British writer is defining himself against. Reading through to the 1960s complicates our understanding of the reception of the feminine middlebrow; it is not simply against a modernist version of the avant-garde that these novels are devalued, but also against later movements that did not prize a 'discourse of mastery'. I would suggest that these novels are consistently devalued because of their femininity, for as well as their content their operations in the territory of 'high' culture are also gendered feminine, as I have suggested above.

Radner's dichotomy of discourses, like Woolf's definition of middlebrow as 'betwixt and between', implies that this is, as Humble argues, 'an essentially parasitical form, dependent on the existence of both a high and a low brow for its identity, reworking their structures and aping their insights'.²⁴ However, in this thesis I have shown that

²² Maroula Joannou, *Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows: Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change 1918-38* (Oxford: Berg, 1995), p. 9.

²³ George Orwell, *Manchester Evening News*, 11 October 1945, p. 2.

²⁴ Humble, pp. 11-12.

while Taylor and von Arnim's feminine middlebrow novels display a clear awareness of their literary context, they are also stylistically innovative and distinctive. As Faye Hammill has argued, 'it is important to recognize the forms of stylistic experimentation which middlebrow writers engaged in, and which are often overlooked because they do not correspond to the experimental strategies of high modernism'.²⁵ While claiming 19th century women writers as their antecedents, Taylor and von Arnim play games with the romantic comedy and the comedy of manners that their highly-literate readers will understand; they offer intertextual jokes and intricate layers of irony that they expect their reader to decode, reconstruct and share; they bring death, cruelty, hypocrisy and loneliness into the middle-class home, and they do all this in order to be able to offer savage critiques of their societies.

In this thesis I have demonstrated how the style of these novels has obscured their meaning to many readers. John Mair, for example in his review of Mr *Skeffington*, argued that the novel 'suspects rather than explores psychological deeps'; his attention has been deflected by the very 'sophistication' and 'subtle and elusive charm' that he himself comments upon.²⁶ As Gladys Graham more insightfully observes,

Elizabeth's brilliant and finished style gives the effect of being casual; her very real plumbing of human nature is carefully hidden behind the lightest of satirical touches; she is a dangerous woman, writing her truths so gayly that they pass for her own iridescent fancies.²⁷

Similarly, James Hilton wrote of Taylor's *The Sleeping Beauty* (1953), 'the story wears a deceptive air of being lightly told. To this deception we must pay tribute; for it is only a very good writer who can probe so deeply and yet be amusing'.²⁸ This is the paradox of the reception of these novels: the 'plumbing of human nature' while being 'amusing' is a supreme technical achievement, yet by being amusing they can be read as trivial. It is important to note that sophisticated wit is not routinely dismissed as trivial; Evelyn Waugh's novels, for example, enjoy critical acclaim and a place in the literary canon. Taylor and von Arnim's wit, however, is belittlingly associated with femininity. These associations are suggested in Mair's review by the word 'charm': are novels by male

²⁵ Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), p. 6.

²⁶ John Mair, *New Statesman and Nation*, 27 January 1940.

²⁷ Gladys Graham, *Saturday Review of Literature*, 6 June 1931.

²⁸ James Hilton, *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, 13 September 1953.

writers ever described as 'charming'? Talia Schaffer, in her analysis of women writers between 1870 and 1910, argues that women were expected to be humorous, as an aspect of their femininity: 'Humour signalled the writer's light, charming point of view, which guaranteed that the work would not have serious political ideas or literary pretensions'.²⁹ This view of women's humour persists in the twentieth century.

Anne Tyler wrote of Taylor (in a statement that is an equally accurate description of von Arnim): 'She cut straight to the heart of things; she could demonstrate in a phrase, in a gesture (though she would never, never be so crass as to tell us outright) that the human soul is a remarkably dark and funny object. In her delicate way, she could be absolutely savage.'³⁰ Taylor and von Arnim, while being charming, are unflinching in their depictions of the cruel realities of life as they saw them. Frequently seen as limiting, the middle-class domestic setting is shown to be the scene of all human nature. Valerie Martin argues in her introduction to *At Mrs Lippincote's*:

While it is true that her subject matter is largely the quiet horror of domestic life, one of the pleasures of reading Mrs Taylor's novels is the wide range of variation rung upon that theme. One might as easily complain that Dante had limited his scope by focusing too relentlessly on the damned souls in hell, as accuse her of 'sameness'.³¹

The three Taylor novels I have focussed on in this thesis demonstrate this: *At Mrs Lippincote's* obliquely depicts the accumulating tensions of an unravelling marriage; *Palladian* exposes fiction as a source of delusion; *In A Summer Season* examines the sexual identity of an aging woman in world in which she is continually observed. The von Arnim novels are similarly wide-ranging: *Christopher and Columbus* is a study of xenophobic persecution during World War I; *Mr Skeffington* examines the trials of aging, and the power struggle of manners, as does *Love*, which also takes on the thorny topic of middle-aged sexual identity for women; and *Vera* depicts female collusion in male tyranny. The subject matter alone suggests that these novels are not simply comfortable leisure reading, but it is the conjunction of subject and form that makes these novels so remarkable. *Palladian* is a strikingly complex meditation on the meanings and value of fiction, contained within a matrix of intertextuality from both

²⁹ Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 8.

³⁰ Anne Tyler, 'The Other Elizabeth Taylor', *The Washington Post*, 21 August 1983.

³¹ Valerie Martin, Introduction to Elizabeth Taylor, *At Mrs Lippincote's* (London: Virago, 2006), p. viii.

19th century texts and contemporary middlebrow novels. *Vera* draws on 19th century narratives to create a ground-breaking synthesis of comedy and horror. The conjunction of form and content is often unsettling, even strange; *Christopher and Columbus* makes a light romantic comedy of the displacement of people by war and their subsequent persecution. These unexpected conjunctions and the novels' self-conscious manipulation of form make them far from the uncomplicated realist novels that they are often regarded as being.

The view of Taylor as conservative is beginning to be countered by academic critics. John Brannigan, in his essay on *At Mrs Lippincote's* argues that 'Taylor's first novel, in proto-feminist fashion, explore the home as an ambivalent space of both familial intimacy and patriarchal oppression'.³² Alice Ferrebe identifies 'feminist feeling' in Taylor's use of romance: 'like many of her female peers, Elizabeth Taylor's writing relies upon romance only ultimately to undermine the genre'. Ferrebe finds, ironically, that it is 'Angry Young Men' texts that are able to 'reproduce romance plots without any gender trouble' and have a happy ending.³³ Von Arnim's work is defended in similar terms by Alison Hennegan, and my work bears out Hennegan's conclusion that von Arnim's 'sense of the political encompasses a perhaps unexpectedly wide range of concerns in which economics, class, gender, sexuality, nationalism and power are inextricably inter-related'.³⁴ Other recent articles by Juliane Roemhild and Jennifer Shepherd suggest that von Arnim engaged with the feminist issues of her day only reluctantly, but I would argue that this is only applicable to her early novels, and the specific context of 'New Woman' fiction in which they were published.³⁵ It is certainly true that neither Taylor nor von Arnim depict women successfully breaking free of patriarchal restraints. Instead their novels show the world as they see it to be. As Katherine Ayers observes in her summary of von Arnim:

³² John Brannigan, 'No Home of One's Own: Elizabeth Taylor's *At Mrs Lippincote's*', in *Women's Writing 1945-60: After the Deluge*, ed. by Jane Dowson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 75.

³³ Alice Ferrebe, 'Elizabeth Taylor's Uses of Romance: Feminist Feeling in 1950s English Fiction', *Literature & History*, 19.1 (2010), p. 61.

³⁴ Alison Hennegan, 'In a Class of Her Own: Elizabeth von Arnim', in *Women Writers of the 1930s*, ed. by Maroula Joannou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 112.

³⁵ Roemhild, Juliane, "'Betwixt and Between": Reading von Arnim Writing Elizabeth', *Working Papers on the Web*, 11 (July 2008) <<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/middlebrow/index.html>> [accessed 7 July 2009]; Jennifer Shepherd, 'Marketing Middlebrow Feminism: Elizabeth von Arnim, the New Woman and the Fin-de-Siecle Book Market', *Philological Quarterly*, 84:1 (2005), 105-131. Shepherd focuses on *Elizabeth and her German Garden* (1898), and Roemhild on *The Solitary Summer* (1899).

In her novels female protagonists struggle to break away from oppressive family situations and restrictive social mores; the wit and sophistication with which she presents this drive for emancipation, along with her understanding of the conditions which often make such an escape both economically infeasible and psychologically improbable, inform her entire literary production.³⁶

If feminism is considered to be the questioning of patriarchal attitudes, then von Arnim and Taylor's novels are undeniably feminist: all their novels examine constructions of femininity and the constraints of domestic life for women.

Von Arnim's reputation today is not what her supporters would have wished. In 1925 Louis Bromfield wrote: 'For the benefit of those who "do not read novels" and those who look upon "light" novels with distrust the reviewer wishes boldly to state the belief that some day "Elizabeth" will occupy a niche a little smaller perhaps but similar in design to that of Jane Austen.'³⁷ Bromfield clearly hoped and believed that the critical climate that dismissed these novels as trivial would pass; he would have been sorely disappointed to know that this disapprobation instead intensified. Writing just after her death in 1941, Hugh Walpole was similarly confident of her future reputation: 'The war has perhaps for the moment dimmed her passing. It will not be for long. English literature is not so crammed with wits that it can spare Elizabeth.'³⁸ Frank Swinnerton, writing in the early 1960s, had seen von Arnim's fame diminish. He also hoped for her rehabilitation, though his ambitions for her reputation were rather lower than Bromfield's:

Her talent lay in fun, satirical portraiture, and farcical comedy, qualities which are scorned by those obsessed by what a correspondent describes to me as "the modern dilemma". Her fame has therefore sunk. If it ever recovers, as I hope it will do, she may find a place below the highest but in a discreet jostle with Fanny Burney, Emily Eden, and Rhoda Broughton.³⁹

There is a fitting irony in Swinnerton's choice of literary colleagues for von Arnim; while Fanny Burney's reputation survives, Emily Eden and Rhoda Broughton are barely

³⁶ Katherine Ayer, 'Elizabeth von Arnim (Countess Mary Annette Beauchamp Russell)' *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol 197: Late-Victorian and Edwardian British Novelists: Second Series (Gale, 1999), p. 10.

³⁷ Louis Bromfield, *Saturday Review of Literature*, 11 April 1925.

³⁸ Hugh Walpole, *Daily Sketch*, quoted in Osborne, p. 310.

³⁹ Frank Swinnerton, *Figures in the Foreground: Literary Reminiscences 1917-1940* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1963), p. 55.

known today.⁴⁰ Von Arnim is not quite in a 'discreet jostle' of obscurity with Broughton and Eden, but her reputation has never really recovered to the time when her 'books were enjoyed and appreciated by the finest minds of her day as well as by a huge popular audience'.⁴¹

Her lack of reputation may in part be a consequence of the image created by her obituaries of a conservative woman and writer, gentle and unthreatening. These notices are of course frequently hagiographies, but those from the *Times* verge on the bizarre in their wilful inaccuracy. Mr Phillips Oppenheim, describing himself as a 'close neighbour', simpered: 'Elizabeth, fairy queen of delicate prose, the gentlest and most kindly of all the humorous writers of your sex, pass on to your place among the immortals.'⁴² Another *Times* obituary described von Arnim as having 'a frank, gentle expression indicative of the peaceful beauty of her temperament'.⁴³ This, it seems, is the acceptable face of female wit to be preserved for posterity: gentle, delicate and kindly. Taylor, in her *Times* obituary, was described in the same conventionally feminine way as 'the most restful of writers [...] her wit and penetration were seldom in doubt but the true asperities of life seemed to elude her'.⁴⁴

Von Arnim has not been well served by biographers. The first, published in 1958 by her daughter Liebet, was described by the *Guardian* reviewer as 'dully written, prosy, long-winded', and, more damagingly, a clear impression of von Arnim is not conveyed: 'The trouble with this book's heroine, who wrote "Elizabeth and Her German Garden" and a number of almost forgotten other books, is that one cannot make her out at all.'⁴⁵ The problem might well be the contradiction between the image created in the obituaries and that given by von Arnim's own letters and those who knew her. A second biography,

⁴⁰ There is a short entry on Rhoda Broughton in the *Encyclopedia of British Women's Writing 1900-1950*, ed. by Faye Hammill, Ashlie Sponenberg and Esme Miskimmin, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 30-1: Broughton wrote that she 'began by being the Zola and I have now become the Charlotte Yonge of English fiction'; Emily Eden, similarly compared to Jane Austen, is even less known today.

⁴¹ Karen Osborne, *'Elizabeth', The Author of Elizabeth and her German Garden* (London: The Bodley Head, 1986), p. 2.

⁴² Mr Phillips Oppenheim, 'Mary Countess Russell: Mr. Phillips Oppenheim's Tribute', *The Times*, 22 February 1941, p. 7.

⁴³ 'Mary Countess Russell: "Elizabeth and her German Garden"', *The Times*, 11 February 1941, p. 7.

⁴⁴ 'Elizabeth Taylor: A novelist of subtlety', *The Times*, 21 November 1975, p. 18. By strange coincidence von Arnim's ashes were scattered with those of her brother Sydney Beauchamp in Tyler's Green churchyard in Penn, Buckinghamshire - the same village in which Taylor lived for much of her adult life. See Osborne, p. 309.

⁴⁵ Isabel Quigly, 'The Nebulous Heroine', *Guardian*, 28 November 1958. Review of Leslie de Charms, *Elizabeth of the German Garden* (London: Heinemann, 1958).

published in 1986, is unfortunately littered with factual inaccuracies and dubious assumptions, making it a poor ambassador for the novelist herself.⁴⁶

It is possible to gain an insight into von Arnim's reception today through online reviews. A survey of reviews on Amazon.co.uk shows many readers giving her novels five stars, praising her 'battles with chauvanism [sic]', 'rapier like wit and keen intelligence' and her 'style as fresh as it was at the turn of century'.⁴⁷ Readers still find these books funny: a reviewer of *The Caravaners* (1909) 'laughed out loud', and a reviewer of *The Pastor's Wife* (1914) wrote that 'it is the book's ability to be as genuinely funny as it is macabre that makes it stand out as a masterpiece'. Despite this praise, very few reviewers question her current status; only one review I could find described her as 'underrated'.⁴⁸ This is in marked contrast to the reviews of Elizabeth Taylor's novels, which frequently take on a tone of advocacy. Reviewers of *The Soul of Kindness* (1964), to take just one example of many, write 'it defeats me why Elizabeth Taylor isn't better-known today as to my mind she is one of the finest novelists of the mid-century', and 'some readers may complain that "nothing every happens" and there is "no character development" in her novels, but they are obviously not reading deeply enough'.⁴⁹

Elizabeth Taylor in fact enjoys a much higher profile today than Elizabeth von Arnim. Ironically, much of the coverage comes from the fact that unlike von Arnim, Taylor is a writer who almost always appears in newspaper articles about underrated novelists who deserve recognition. In *The Observer* in 2007, for example, when 50 contemporary novelists were asked for their nominations in this category, three chose Elizabeth Taylor. In this article Robert McCrum describes Taylor as 'a postwar author of some of the finest and subtlest English novels of her time', who 'among her distinguished contemporaries such as Barbara Pym, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Elizabeth Bowen, [...] stands out as a model of sense and sensibility', and calls *Mrs Palfrey at the*

⁴⁶ Karen Usborne, 'Elizabeth': the Author of 'Elizabeth and her German Garden' (London: The Bodley Head, 1986). See the review by John G. Slater, 'Two countesses and one formidable woman', *Russell*, Winter (1987-88), 188-192, for details of some of these inaccuracies.

⁴⁷ Reviews of *Elizabeth and her German Garden* (1898), *The Solitary Summer* (1899), *The Caravaners* (1909), *The Pastor's Wife* (1914), *Vera* (1921), *The Enchanted April* (1922), *Love*, (1925), *All the Dogs of My Life* (1936), *Mr Skeffington* (1940) <www.amazon.co.uk> [accessed 22 November 2010].

⁴⁸ Review of *The Pastor's Wife* (1914) <www.amazon.co.uk> [accessed 22 November 2010].

⁴⁹ Reviews of *The Soul of Kindness* (1964) <www.amazon.co.uk> [accessed 22 November 2010].

Claremont (1971) a 'masterpiece'.⁵⁰ Reissues of her novels with introductions by modern novelists such as Sarah Waters and Philip Hensher in 2006 also drew many appreciative newspaper articles, as did the recent film adaptations of *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* (2005) and *Angel* (2007);⁵¹ she is described as 'highly underrated',⁵² 'brilliant but still neglected',⁵³ 'one of the hidden treasures of the English novel',⁵⁴ and praised as 'pin sharp'⁵⁵ and 'economical and elegant as well as horridly funny'.⁵⁶ The publication of Nicola Beauman's substantial biography in 2009 stimulated yet more admiring press coverage, with each reviewer again advocating a higher status for Taylor. Beauman herself is understandably exasperated by these repetitive laudatory comments: 'If only [...] critics would start taking it for granted that Elizabeth is one of the great novelists, rather than saying the same thing about her over and over again.'⁵⁷

Perhaps, with the increasing academic attention to Taylor, this time has finally come. Von Arnim's status remains more uncertain, and there is the suspicion that one of the reasons for this is that her literary innovations are too far from the modernist. Taylor has been described as 'modernist' by Beauman, and 'post-modern' by Hanson - statements that are unlikely to be made of von Arnim.⁵⁸ She may be too exuberant, too 'Edwardian' and too downright funny ever to be taken seriously. The 'same old story' of gender politics also continues; in a 2010 interview the novelist Jonathan Franzen, for example, observed that: "The categories by which we value fiction are skewed male, and this creates a very destructive disconnect between the critical establishment and the

⁵⁰ Robert McCrum, 'How did we miss these?', *Observer*, 2 September 2007.

⁵¹ Thus far, Taylor has not been well served by screen adaptations. The film of *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* (Dir. Dan Ireland. Paragon Pictures. 2005) is deeply schmaltzy, and in its keenness to make the relationship between Mrs Palfrey and the young writer touching has made it entirely unconvincing. The film does not give any indication of the sharpness of Taylor's writing, or her lack of sentimentality. *Angel* (Dir. Francois Ozon. Lionsgate. 2007) received very mixed reviews and was not a success at the box office; critics and viewers seemed unsure how to receive the film. Ozon felt that in order for the film to succeed he need to take what Kingsley Amis described as 'powerful story about a violent and hysterical egotist', and make the character of Angel more appealing, and the relationship between Angel and Esmé a convincing love story. (Interview with Ozon in 'Making of' additional feature of *Angel* DVD.) The resulting film is strange and uncertain in tone. Ironically, both film makers appear to have felt the need to *alter* Taylor's novels in order to make them more 'appealing', and resemble more the undemanding women's novels they are often mistaken to be.

⁵² Alex Clark, 'The anatomist', *Observer*, 2 April 2006.

⁵³ Peter Bradshaw, 'Those dead Brit writers are just so totally cool to play...', *Guardian*, 5 December 2006, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Philip Hensher, 'The other Liz Taylor', *The Telegraph*, 9 April 2006.

⁵⁵ *Guardian*, 5 December 2006, p. 2.

⁵⁶ Jenny Diski, 'How did we miss these?', *Observer*, 2 September 2007.

⁵⁷ Beauman, p. 396.

⁵⁸ Beauman, p. 398; Clare Hanson, "'Katherine Mansfield's Journal Covered with Dust": The Postmodern Short Fiction of Elizabeth Taylor', *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 22 (1994), p. 92.

predominantly female readership of novels [...] That's inarguable.”⁵⁹ However, the online reviews demonstrate that both von Arnim and Taylor's novels continue to find new readers: they are discussed in book groups and recommended by friends and by fellow readers online. A close-knit, intimately involved community of readers thus continues to be created by these novels. It is appropriate that both authors are published by Virago, described by Lennie Goodings, the current publisher, as ‘a uniquely collaborative venture. [...] Rarely has there been such a close and intimate relationship between publisher and reader’.⁶⁰ The intricacies of the relationship between reader and text that I have demonstrated in this thesis might suggest they cannot be readily recreated by readers coming to the texts so long after they were published, but the jokes are still shared and the pleasures of recognition continue.

⁵⁹ Ed Pilkington, *Guardian Weekend*, 25 September 2010, p. 16.

⁶⁰ Lennie Goodings, ‘About Virago’, *Virago Press News and Blog* <www.viragobooks.net> [accessed 22 November 2010]. As of 2010, Virago publishes the following Elizabeth Taylor novels: *A Game of Hide and Seek* (1951), *A View of the Harbour* (1947), *Angel* (1957), *At Mrs Lippincote's* (1945), *Blaming* (1976), *In a Summer Season* (1961), *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* (1971), *The Soul of Kindness* (1964), *The Wedding Group* (1968); and the following Elizabeth von Arnim novels: *The Adventures of Elizabeth in Rugen* (1904), *All the Dogs of My Life* (1936), *Christopher and Columbus* (1919), *Elizabeth and her German Garden* (1898), *Fraulein Schmidt and Mr Anstruther* (1907), *Love* (1925), *Mr Skeffington* (1940), *The Caravaners* (1909), *The Enchanted April* (1922), *The Pastor's Wife* (1914), *The Solitary Summer* (1899), *Vera* (1921).

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