

## **Feminizing the Nation and the Country House: Women Dramatists 1938-1941**

The country house has often been depicted as representative of the aristocracy, but beyond this it is also a paternalistic and patriarchal institution. In the drama of the middle part of the twentieth century, though, the country house increasingly began to be related to the middle classes and the matriarchal. By looking at texts by three of the most popular writers during 1930s and 1940s – Daphne du Maurier, Dodie Smith, and Esther McCracken – it is possible to show how women drew on literary traditions such as the retirement, georgic and pastoral genres in order to emphasize the ‘Englishness’ of England at a time of national crisis.

Mark Girouard has famously asked: ‘What were country houses for? They were not originally, whatever they may be now, just large houses in the country in which rich people lived. Essentially they were power houses – the houses of a ruling class’ (*Life in the English House*, 2). This power was based on the ownership of land, and the obligations of the tenants who worked that land on its behalf, in militaristic or political terms, and the connections that could be made with other fellow landowners.<sup>1</sup> Whilst the land was important, it meant nothing without the house that was built upon it, which acted as a symbol of the owner’s wealth, breeding, power and prestige. Girouard describes it as ‘an image-maker, which projected an aura of glamour, mystery or success around its owner.’ (3).

In the first part of the twentieth century, a number of factors changed the power base of the country, until by the end of the century ‘the old automatic correlation between the ownership of an estate and the right to execute power has vanished’ (318). Land, until the 1880s, had been seen as safe, but an economic decline for farmers made the dependence upon income from this increasingly difficult. Businessmen from this country and others like America and South Africa bought into the mystique of the country house. It continued to represent the quintessence of Englishness until its decline after the Second World War, which was caused in part by lack of staff (particularly after the depletion of the population during the First World War), technological developments in domestic appliances, and a greater range of job opportunities at all levels of society. Now the ‘ruined houses and the site of lost houses are the archaeological markers of a departed order’ (Kelsall, *The Great Good Place*, 155).

When the term *country house* is used, it is generally a stately home that is being considered – vast estates like Longleat, Blenheim and Chatsworth, or the smaller versions at Penshurst or Knole. Malcolm Kelsall in his article on ‘*Rebecca* and the English Country House’ describes them as ‘a visible sign of “the ancient social order” ’ (‘Manderley Revisited,’ 303). Increasingly, though, as the twentieth century progressed, one could talk about ‘a house in the country rather than a country house’, a place that had no parks or farms (Girouard, *Life*, 302). This is certainly true of many of the plays from the interwar years to the 1950s, whose setting is that of a drawing room in a country house a few miles away from London, or in the Home Counties. Agatha Christie’s murder mysteries took place here, for example, as did plays by Enid Bagnold, Esther McCracken, Noel Coward, and W. Somerset Maugham. These houses stood for all that was middle brow and middle class, two terms that have helped to diminish them in the eyes of critics. Ken Tynan notoriously wrote of such a play that:

Its setting is a country house in what used to be called Loamshire but is now, as a heroic tribute to realism, sometimes called Berkshire. Except when someone must sneeze, or be murdered, the sun invariably shines...Joys and sorrows are giggles and whimpers: the crash of denunciation dwindles into ‘Oh, stuff Mummy!’ and ‘Oh, really Daddy!’.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the upper middle class or bourgeois country house at this time also represented a form of nostalgia, particularly important during the 1930s and 1940s. Salman Rushdie has claimed that the writing of the Second World War involved ‘a certain amount of living in a green world of the past in England’, and this can certainly be said to be true of the plays of the period (quoted in Lassner, *British Women Writers*, 1). However, this longing for the past also helped to formulate a sense of nationalism. It has been noted that:

most of the national identities to be found in Europe are not simply natural growths but conscious constructs created over the course of modern history...using those opinion-shaping means at their disposal - from organizing public celebrations to creating symbols and customs, hymns, myths, and

monuments – the nation-states tried to raise the consciousness of a national identity among their citizenry and thus enhance their own image... Writers, artists, and scholars were drawn into this process and played their parts, whether intentionally or not, in the self-portrayal of their nations (*Concepts of National Identity*, 8).

Political leaders, particularly Stanley Baldwin who held the role of Prime Minister three times in the 1920s and 1930s (and was considered by some to be the instrumental figure in the National Government from 1931 to 1935) sought to ‘regulate and define public opinion, by broadening the Conservative discourse of the nation, deepening its reach into the culture of “the people”.’ One of the ways in which he did this was through a series of speeches on England designed to activate ‘a sense of national identity’ by appealing ‘to what he called the “natural devotion to the land and people of one’s birth”.’ Known as ‘Farmer Stan’, he coined the slogan ‘England is the country and the country is England’ (Bloom, *Bestsellers*, 95). As Bill Schwarz tells us, Baldwin’s ‘depiction of England was steeped in an inordinately detailed image of the regional, rural landscapes – ruralism which signified not only the past-in-the-present but, in his own words, “the land of childhood and memory”.’ The images used are those ‘of nature, home, harmony and...the continuity of human life carried through the family’ (Schwarz, ‘The Language of Constitutionalism,’ 14, 15, 16).

The stately house, with its connotations of Englishness and tradition, would appear to be a suitable image for the time, but rather than stressing permanence and stability, it often conjured up a world in decline. Perhaps the most famous literary rendition of the country house in the interwar and war periods is in Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* (1944), although one could also cite a whole host of other works, like D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928), Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts* (1941) and Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*. Du Maurier’s novel was a bestseller when it came out in 1938. A stage production was in the planning stages before war was announced in 1939: John Gielgud showed the book to his manager, Binkie Beaumont, and together they convinced Daphne du Maurier to adapt it for the theatre. Initially Gielgud was to produce and star as Maxim de Winter, although the part eventually went Owen Nares, with Celia Johnson as the Second Mrs de Winter and Margaret Rutherford

as Mrs. Danvers. There was some concern that Hitchcock's cinematic version would ruin the fortunes of the play but the opposite was true, with stage, novel and film adaptations providing different interpretations, and all working together to fuel mass audiences for each version. Eventually the play ran throughout the duration of the war for 380 performances in the West End and also went on several successful provincial tours. The war productions referenced the house in a quasirealistic manner, with a lush setting composed of a grand staircase, flower-filled vases, and family portraits. A play, however, is always open to directorial interpretation: Frank McGuinness's latest adaptation is played out on a minimalist set with barely no representation of Manderley at all.

In the novel, though, the house is predominant. During the description of the dream with which the book begins, the nameless narrator depicts the estate as a place that belongs to her and is loved and shared with another. It is a place of tranquil repose, as in the retreat poetry of the seventeenth century: 'There was Manderley, our Manderley', she says, 'secretive and silent as it had always been... Time could not wreck the perfect symmetry of those walls, nor the site itself, a jewel in the hollow of a hand (6).' The terminology is faintly georgic. Nature has been cultivated and harmoniously controlled, and there is contentment and quiet efficiency amongst the workers, some of whom have looked after the previous generation or been born on the estate. There is a sense of splendour but not of affectation, and hospitality is paramount: regardless of what their personal feelings are, it is the de Winters's duty to receive guests and host the Manderley ball that brings so much happiness to those around them. It is also a place of repose, which underpins the retirement tradition. Malcolm Kelsall has noted that the name of part of the estate, Happy Valley, had already been used by Byron 'to describe the ideal setting of Newstead Abbey', and it was also 'the designation of the earthly paradise in *Rasselas* in which Johnson's philosophical prince was raised' ('Manderley Revisited,' 305). In the framing device of the novel *Rebecca*, which is not evident in the play, the narrator describes the misery of living away from England, an emotion also felt by the author who wrote it whilst in Egypt and greatly missing her homeland; again, it was also written on the cusp of war when there were understandable concerns about the future. The descriptions of the English countryside are faithfully realized, but it is significant that it is mentioned in terms of the estate and of others of a similar social status: 'I am a mine of information on the English countryside', the narrator tells us:

I know the name of every owner of every British moor, yes – and their tenants too. I know how many grouse are killed, how many partridge, how many head of deer. I know where the trout are rising, and where the salmon leap. I attend all meets. I follow every run. Even the names of those who walk hound puppies are familiar to me. The state of the crops, the price of fat cattle, the mysterious ailments of swine, I relish them all. A poor pastime, perhaps, and not a very intellectual one, but I breathe the air of England as I read, and can face this glittering sky with greater courage (10-11).

For the Second Mrs de Winter, and incidentally one who did not know about country pursuits like hunting when she first enters Manderley, the countryside is seen in similar terms to Ben Jonson's 'To Penshurst' (pub. 1610), which presents a celebration of aristocratic comfort. Barbara K. Lewalski tell us:

Jonson's poem, an ode, established the genre of the English country-house poem as a celebration of patriarchy; it praises the Sidney estate as a quasi-Edenic place whose beauty and harmony are centred in and preserved by its lord, who 'dwells' permanently within it. However false to social reality, the poem constructs a social ideal: a benevolent and virtuous patriarchal governor; a house characterized by simplicity and usefulness; a large extended family with lord, lady, children, servants, and retainers all fulfilling their specific, useful functions; the harmony of man and nature; a working agricultural community of interdependent classes linked together in generosity and love; ready hospitality to guests of all stations, from poets to kings; a fruitful and chaste wife and mother embodying and transmitting the estate's ideal fusion of nature and culture; and stability ensured by the religion and virtue passed on from the lord and lady to their progeny. Penshurst is imagined as a *locus amoenus*, harmonizing pastoral and providential abundance with georgic cultivation ('Seizing Discourse and Reinventing Genres,' 55).

Du Maurier's work does not align itself totally with this description of Penshurst, but there are a number of striking similarities. Both are places of fruitful production, and the stress is on the estate's self-sufficiency, which works to symbolize the landlord's power. The providential bounty, the largesse of the estate owner, is also exemplified in a telling vision of the Second Mrs de Winter (with its odd syntax), when she herself visits an old lady on the estate with a basket of peaches. 'Her hands stretch out to me, "The Lord bless you, Madam, for being so good", and my saying "Just send up the house for anything you want" (56).' As with Penshurst, then, *Manderley* has the ability to posit a kind of Golden Age enjoyed by the estate and its inhabitants, an ideal that can also be seen to embrace patriarchy.

The narrator certainly grows to support the conservative denotation of the estate. At the beginning, the Second Mrs de Winter is an outsider whose only previous knowledge of the house is as an observer: when a child she buys a postcard of *Manderley* simply because she admires its architectural features; but its emblematic significance has to be pointed out to her. However, although her lack of status is stressed at the beginning, as is her gaucheness when faced with the rituals of *Manderley*, the spell cast by the mythicism of the house and the symbolic death of Rebecca, the previous incumbent, allows her identity to be subsumed into the figurative role of the 'lady of the manor'. Where once she worried about the vast array of food that is laid out before them but goes uneaten, she eventually does not care about the wastage anymore because no-one else does. Similarly, she finds reserves of strength to be severe and assertive with the servants as befitting her role as Maxim de Winter's wife. There is a closing of ranks in order to protect the family and its estate, as the de Winters call on their vast network of powerfully placed people to help out. When Jack Favell is unsuccessful in trying to blackmail Maxim, he accuses Colonel Julyan – the local magistrate - of siding with someone of the same class: ' "You're going to hold his hand through this. You're going to back de Winter. You won't let him down because you've dined with him, and he's dined with you. He's a big name down here. He's the owner of *Manderley*. You poor bloody little snob" (329). Rather than seeing the country estate as an anachronism at this point in the twentieth century, then, the de Winters see it as something that must be kept alive. But whilst Daphne du Maurier's sympathies seem to lie with her narrator here, and

therefore the historical perspective of Manderley as a location of social significance, she also shows that the country house is in decline.

Unlike the Sidney family in the seventeenth century, there is no progeny here, and therefore du Maurier's work charts the end of the de Winter line and the Manderley estate. The first Mrs de Winter - Rebecca - has the three qualities that Maxim considers suitable for a woman of her position: beauty, brains, and breeding. However, she brings about the ruination of the family and therefore the country house through her degeneracy. Associated more with the wild seashore and the rampant, blood-red rhododendrons than the cultivated gardens, it is Rebecca's inability to keep up the moral rectitude expected of a lady of her standing that leads to her murder by the patriarchal owner of the estate. Indeed, she is the archetypal wilful woman who threatens to taint the blood line of the de Winters by taking lovers from a 'lower' social status: Max believes that she will sleep with anyone, even a worker from the estate. The plague that she brings can only be destroyed through fire, but this also destroys the house. Malcolm Kelsall has seen this 'a tale of paradise lost', though men and women are made stronger through suffering and the burning of Manderley becomes 'a symbol of purgatorial flame and of progressive pilgrimage' (*The Great Good Place*, 183). Du Maurier's text, then, reworked the image of the country house for wartime audiences through its tense relationship with the English stately home that is aristocratic, patriarchal, even mythic, and yet simultaneously empty of a future. After the destruction of Manderley, an event that is presaged from the beginning, the master and second mistress of the house are left without an heir, a home and a nation. They are turned into exiles who wander the luxury hotels abroad – a diminution of the country house. Beyond this, though, and this was particularly true for audiences watching the play as bombs rained down upon them, the fear was that the English would also be left without a nation. The fire that destroys Manderley can stand for the fires of the Blitz that threatened to destroy England and with it the English way of life. The fall of the country house is therefore a potent image at this time. As Phyllis Lassner notes:

Amidst the pressures of shortages, evacuation, and maintaining the stability to which these classes were committed, all staples of their lives are dashed. Gone is the solidity of the manor, the quaint village, or urban neighbourhood, with their

self-contained, reserved, and decent populace. Its heirs are disoriented and decentred by wartime conditions, the sum of which blasts all containment, reserve, and decency into social and psychological shrapnel (*British Women Writers of World War II*, 15-16).

Like Daphne du Maurier, other writers presented a picture of the nation that stressed its quintessential Englishness. Vera Brittain described its bucolic charms in a way that suggested a sacredness that would make it impervious to enemy attack: Those who call themselves our enemies may obliterate buildings... assassinate men and women; they cannot eliminate the flowers, the trees... the quiet inviolate spirit of a whole countryside... Whatever the future may bring of hope or despair, of sanity or suffering, of peace or war, the villages of this country will be England for ever.<sup>3</sup> Numerous critics have shown that such depictions of England are disingenuous, relying on a nostalgic and unrealistic view 'of England as a unified people sharing a pastoral vision of a continuously harmonious past', in Lassner's words (50). Indeed, this was one that several dramatists at the time were keen to present. This, however, was perceived of as a necessity during the war, and as part of the cultural propaganda that saw such images in terms of a patriotic duty.

Dodie Smith and Esther McCracken both take on a view of the unified family, tradition and the pastoral tradition, but rather than using a stately house as an image of England, they focus on a different kind of national identity, one that relies on the values of the middle classes. Whilst Baldwin and other commentators were concerned with figures like Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Dickens, popular media images of the 'plucky Englander' and the 'cosy middle class family' was equally part of the attempt to construct a national identity. Media like the newsreels, documentaries, feature films, newspapers, radio and theatre became important propaganda vehicles during the Second World War. Cate Haste has written on how propaganda was 'rationalized and modernized' during the previous war. At this time it mainly revolved around the restriction and structuring of information in order 'to justify the war and assist recruitment' (*Keep the Home Fires Burning*, 2, 3). Propaganda during the Second World War was more inclusive and subtle, focusing on the home front rather than what was happening abroad. Sometimes this issued from the state; more frequently though it took the form of a general dissemination



of images of England that, whilst not always realistic, presented a concern with history, family and community: the war was being fought, therefore, to preserve the English way of life from obliteration. For example, the cinema was an important tool, with war documentaries in particular used to show the nation united against a common enemy.<sup>4</sup> Humphrey Jennings's *Listen to Britain* (1941) 'stressed the collective defence of the country and transmitted a strong impression of the best of what was being defended, from Blake and Browning to Flanagan and Allen' (Colls, *Identity of England*, 129). Films like *Mrs. Miniver* (1942) and *Brief Encounter* (1945), with which many plays by women dramatists of the time have an affinity, showed the need for stoicism as a means to hold the family together.<sup>5</sup>

In *Dear Octopus* (1938), by Dodie Smith – the most successful female playwright of the 1930s – the house represents the family, with its sense of timelessness and longevity, as well as England itself. Its concern with the group rather than the individual reinforces the importance of nationhood when the country was on the brink of war, and acts as a form of propaganda in the same way as films like *Mrs. Miniver*. It also acts as a precursor of plays like *Quiet Wedding* (1938) and *Quiet Week-End* (1941), by Esther McCracken, all of which focus on a lively family group of unexceptional people who lead comparatively quiet, plodding lives. In this way, both Smith and McCracken captured a need on the stage for presenting the ordinary vicissitudes of the English way of life. Here the family is subjected to an affectionate gaze, as it is concluded that, regardless of the problems caused by war, money, career, relationships, the family survives everything to protect those within its embrace.

*Dear Octopus* was known as the play that no catastrophe could kill because it opened at the same time as the Munich crisis. Again, Sheridan Morley describes how 'audiences in London (and around the country during its tour) found in Dodie Smith's domestic homilies something both touching and reassuring. If the middle classes were to have to go to war, this was precisely the world for which they would be fighting.'<sup>6</sup> The play, which ran for over 400 performances, centres on the preparations for the Golden Wedding of Dora and Charles Randolph, and the setting is one of those so hated by Ken Tynan. The country house, in North Essex, like the family, is solid. It was 'built in early Victorian days but on Georgian lines and, though much of the furniture is heavy and old-fashioned, the general atmosphere is pleasant and comfortable' (Smith, *Dear Octopus*, 7).

When the play was revived at the Haymarket in 1967, Dodie Smith quibbled that the sets were too opulent and were ‘not as true to the text as the original sets were’. She was aware that audiences in the ‘thirties demanded that stage families should be dressed and housed above their station in life, but I did not try to pander to this’.<sup>7</sup> It is important that Smith makes the owners of this house trades people rather than members of the upper classes. This represents a shift towards a portrayal of a class that was more accessible to contemporary audiences. Charles Randolph is a retired draper, descendent of a long line of drapers, and Smith defends their seeming affluence: they have servants because the cost of living was cheaper in the 30s; the house itself is ‘cold, damp, draughty, has only one bathroom, and an inadequate supply of hot water. There is no electricity and the beds are uncomfortable’.<sup>8</sup> The Randolph family, therefore, has the perceived virtues of the upper classes – wisdom, loyalty, stoicism, duty – but without the trappings and hauteur of the de Winters.

Characters arrive after a long time away, and their comments about the house itself ensure that it is seen as a haven of stability amidst impermanence. Belle, Dora’s sister-in-law, comments on how little the rooms have changed and looks forward to sleeping in one of the spare rooms with the same picture on the wall that she remembered from ‘the first time I came here – when Will and I were engaged’ (20). The surrounding area has altered little, ‘except for those hideous bungalows...And the council houses’ (22). This changing face of the English countryside is one that is central to the middle-class, middle-brow literature of the period. Betjeman is also known for deriding the newly sprung up suburbs, notoriously asking ‘Come, friendly bombs, and fall on Slough’. It is significant that he ends this savage poem with a paean to the pastoral, telling the reader that ‘The cabbages are coming now:/The earth exhales.’<sup>9</sup> Agatha Christie too showed her distaste of the changes wreaked upon the countryside in novels like *The Mirror Crack’d From Side to Side* (1962) in which the ‘Development’ in Miss Marple’s village is seen as menacingly ‘other’, bringing with it a new and very different class to the village of St. Mary Mead. Incidentally, this was also commented upon in *Rebecca* when a holiday maker remarks that large estates like Manderley will soon be turned into bungalows

In *Dear Octopus* the forces of change are seen as oppositional to the family, and it therefore works to envelop the right kind of outsiders in its warm embrace. Laurel,

Hugh's wife, thinks that his family represents continuity and tradition, and is thrilled to think that their baby is now 'sleeping in your father's nursery, with your father's old nurse looking after him' (p. 35). She is an only child and tells Hugh that 'People who are born in flats don't have ancestors' (p. 34).<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the family secretary, Fenny, arrived 'looking exactly like little Orphan Annie' and has ended up adopting the Randolph family as her own. In this way, Maggie Gale notes, 'the outsider provides future structure and security for a traditionally closed social unit the foundations of which are beginning to crumble' (*West End Women*, 178).

The family is headed by Dora, a matriarchal figure, more gently comic than other representations of mothers in the 1930s, such as in G. B. Stern's *The Matriarch* (1935), Gertrude Jennings's *Family Affairs* (1934), Clemence Dane's *Moonlight is Silver* (1934) and, later in the 1950s, Enid Bagnold's *The Chalk Garden* (1956). For Gale, 'the matriarchal maternal figures represent mothers as the resolvers of family conflict, and the maintainers of order within the family. They are the "household engineers", serving what they perceive as being the needs of their children, controlling access to family information and indeed the structure and activities of the family unit itself' (121). Unlike the patriarchy that seeks to rule through power and influence, the matriarchy – in this instance at least – works to provide security and stability. The family in *Dear Octopus* groups around the older generation of Dora and Charles, who have dealt with bereavement and other tragedies. They have lived through life and managed to survive. Dora and Charles, in their seventies, are still a handsome couple, who reign over their family with a benevolent tolerance. Dora in particular is able to communicate with the children and sympathize with their plight. Their relationship is affectionate. The eldest son, Nicholas, notes that 'during my entire life the slightest disagreement between you has been settled by Father kissing you on the top of your head' (p. 25) and that 'Mother has an invincible happiness' (67).

The play is famous for its last scene, in which Nicholas offers up a toast to the assembled Randolphs. He wonders what his grandmother would say about the family nowadays: 'I think she might shake her head and say, 'The family isn't what it was.' And there, most honoured Grandmamma, lies its strength. It is, like nearly every British institution, adaptable. It bends, it stretches – but it never breaks. And so I give you our

toast...To the family – that dear octopus from whose tentacles we never quite escape nor, in our inmost hearts, ever quite wish to’ (88-89).

The title of the play, then, encapsulates its theme, a profound attachment to something that also has the propensity to smother and destroy. In a simplistic sense, the play represents a time of innocence when ‘District Nurse’ was the ‘most terrible word’ of which a child can think (p. 41). The family is also the secure place where children, battered by the vicissitudes of life, can retreat when things go wrong, and, for the moment at least, uphold its class position. And the action offers far more than entertainment. It is fundamentally about the two world wars.<sup>11</sup> Firstly it looks back at the waste and carnage wreaked between 1914-1918, and how this has changed both individuals and the social hierarchy, especially the middle-class household. Secondly, as critics such as Gale have pointed out, the play ‘looks at the family as an emblem of newly threatened Nationhood’ at a moment when England was crucially teetering on the brink of war.<sup>12</sup> The family, particularly one structured around a house that may be crumbling, but is still standing, acts as a bulwark against the changing tide of time and history. In fact, the middle classes are seen as the hopeful inheritors of the earth.

Esther McCracken’s *Quiet Week-End* does not need to make any such defensive assertions about the importance of the family. Her play takes it for granted that the week-end house in the country represented middle class values at their best. She feminises the country house motif in a way that spoke directly to the increased wartime female audiences through its focus upon the commonplace lives of humdrum people in their average house in the country. Derided because she wrote about the cosy and familiar, McCracken’s focus upon the English middle class habitat nevertheless showed her ability to judge the mood of the moment.

The play was turned down by the pre-eminent theatre producer of the time, Binkie Beaumont, because he thought it a poor imitation of Dodie Smith’s style, but it was one of the smash hits of the war period, running for nearly 1,300 performances. *Quiet Week-End* acts as a sequel to McCracken’s earlier success, *Quiet Wedding*. It brings back the Royd family, this time set before the war, as the Royds travel down to their week-end house in the village of Throppleton. Like the house in *Dear Octopus*, the décor is not ostentatious or even indicative of wealth: the setting ‘is a pleasant room, with furniture obviously collected from attics and relatives’, and the strong sense of community is

stressed by the constant social intercourse between the Royds and various members of the village: people walk in and out of the house without knocking and continue conversations that had been started the previous week-end (*Quiet Week-End*, 5). Unlike *Manderley*, which was aristocratic and exclusive, the country house in Throppleton is deliberately troped as inclusive as servants, neighbours, relatives and friends meet in an idealistic representation of village life. As Susan Croft explains, this play supplied ‘the contemporary audience’s need for reassurance during the Second World War by emphasizing the old “ordinary” ways of living’ (*She Also Wrote Plays*, 160).

The setting of plays like *Quiet Week-End* and its time of inception, consciously or unconsciously draws on ancient pastoral tradition. In his article entitled ‘What is Pastoral?’, Paul Alpers concludes that it is an endlessly adaptable genre, which focuses on symbolic meanings of the land.<sup>13</sup> During the period under discussion it was, for example, used as an aristocratic plea for ‘rustic patriotism’, as Julie V. Gottlieb describes Vita Sackville-West’s *The Land* (1926) and *The Garden* (1946).<sup>14</sup> Again, John Betjeman’s poetry also draws on pastoral to celebrate the Anglo Saxon landscape of Victorian villas and English villages, with his capacity, as Jessica Maynard says, ‘to mythologise the very recent past, to transform it into what will later become “heritage”’ (32).

From the Latin, meaning ‘concerning shepherds’, the pastoral was originally literature that attempts to idealize the life of the shepherd and the country folk (often written as conversation between shepherds). The recurrent artistic concern was to construct an idyllic version of rural life, which harked back to the idealized Greek state of Arcadia. Often the Golden Age is referred to as a time when humans lived contently on the fruits of the earth without cultivation. There are several means by which the pastoral mode of writing works. It can act as a means of offering, allegorically, thinly disguised tributes of praise and flattery to real people whom the poet admires or wants to please – becoming therefore part of the process of patronage; and it has also been used as a vehicle of moral or social criticism, usually comparing the corruption of the city with that of the countryside.

A play like McCracken’s *Quiet Week-End* works in two other ways. First, it represents a desire for the simple life, where life has been reduced to its basics. The worries of the putative ‘shepherds’ and ‘shepherdesses’ in the play are of their own

making, and therefore non-existent. They live in an ideal climate with no serious physical calamities. Their only preoccupation is love and making songs and music about these experiences. In McCracken's play, the characters experience the ups and downs of relationships, which are treated with gentle comedy. They have come to the country to unwind after life in the metropolis, doing nothing much more than 'Go for walks – and generally laze' (27). Sinking into the gentle pace of rural life, all events lead up to the village concert, where everyone joins in singing traditional folk songs, as in 'Glorious Devon' and 'Drake is Going West, Me Lads'.

Second, the pastoral here works as a form of political retreat. For early seventeenth-century poets, an evocation of a vanished golden age became way of registering the unstable conditions of the early Jacobean period, with concerns about Elizabeth I's succession. In the third decade of the twentieth century, though, a play like *Quiet Week-End* represents a rural nation that sets itself against impending change, in this case the Second World War. Simon Featherstone has also pointed out how 'the pastoral establishes a "beautiful relationship" between the rich and the poor', with each class working together 'as an organic, apolitical whole' ('The Nation as Pastoral', 160). Indeed, in *Quiet Week-End*, the Royds are aided and abetted by all members of the community to make the week-end a success. The servants - Sam Pecker, an occasional handyman, and Bella, a maid who has been with the Royds for years - are portrayed as loyal, but not subservient as at Manderley; rather, they are bucolic eccentrics, part of the continuity of village life. Such a world, though, is not considered sentimental or ridiculous, but instead portrayed as charming and suitable to the period in which it was staged. Because the play is set in an unspecified period, but produced on the stage in 1941, the English way of life continues untrammelled in the present day, exactly as it was imagined it had done in the past. The audience, concerned as it would have been, with rationing and bombs at home, and hostilities abroad, could forget their troubles and watch a series of minor comic calamities unfold. Beyond this, though, the country house is being presented in a metonymic way, standing in for the English countryside with all its rural practices of fishing, poaching, blackberrying and jam making. The pastoral tradition, once seen as part of aristocratic values, is now couched in terms of the middle classes, and the countryside is there to act as a salve to the wartime audience. Whilst the characters do not take part in hard labour or add to the economics of the land, the link to

the ancient literary tradition of pastoral both celebrates and presents as eternal this indominatable way of life.

Enormously successful plays like *Dear Octopus* and *Quiet Week-End*, then, served the nation at the time by presenting plays that focused on a way of life that was perceived of as being under threat from outside forces. It did this in a way that was sometimes criticized as being deliberately female. Alison Light has persuasively argued that, during these years, ‘What had formerly been held as the virtues of the private sphere of middle-class life [took] on a new public and national significance.’ There is a move towards a view of ‘Englishness at once less imperial and more inward-looking, more domestic and more private – and, in terms of pre-war standards, more “feminine”’ (*Forever England*, 8). The three women dramatists mentioned here were outstandingly popular during the war and it is interesting to consider how this may be linked to the nexus of ideas surrounding gender, home and nationhood. In the novel of *Rebecca*, the story is told from a female perspective. The narrator is an outsider who is eventually subsumed into the patriarchal fold in an attempt to bolster the aristocratic country estate, eventually destroyed from within by a woman’s untamed sexuality. The play version concentrates on the responses of Maxim de Winter from the beginning, and therefore strengthens the conservative meaning of the story, where traditional values hold sway and the aristocracy carries the virtue of the country in its hands. A house like Manderley is, as Malcolm Kelsall says, ‘the sign of the loveliness of England, and aestheticism and patriotism are at one’ (*The Great Good Place*, 160). The decline of the de Winters represents both the gradual lessening of power of the upper classes, and an apocalyptic vision of the future of England. So, where the house in *Rebecca* may have once represented a ‘power house’, one equated with authority and patronage, it is now in the process of being replaced by the more middle-class renditions of the country house, as they appear in plays by Dodie Smith and Esther McCracken. These draw strength from the feminization of this space by presenting it as a domestic arena rather than a symbolic image of patriarchal dominance. The close family ties are highlighted both in *Dear Octopus* and *Quiet Week-End*, as well as the slightly shambolic but durable fixture of the house, and, in McCracken’s play, the idealised sense of community in the village. Plays about the domesticated country house certainly played their role in proselytising about how images of the middle class family at home could help to win the war.

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<sup>1</sup> Girouard notes that ‘Anyone who had sufficient resources and followers, and displayed them with enough prominence, was likely to be offered jobs and perquisites by the central government in return for his support. Acceptance produced money, which could be turned into more land, more power and more supporters. The more a landowner prospered, the more anxious his fellow landowners were to be connected with him...it was a route that led often enough to broad estates, a peerage, and the establishment of a dynasty’ (*Life*, 2).

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Tynan, *Curtains: Selections from the Drama Criticism and Related Writings*, London: Longmans, 19, p.86. In Michael Coveney’s review of a revival of Enid Bagnold’s *The Chalk Garden* in 1992, he alludes to Tynan’s observation: ‘It is a mordant, beautifully written and rather subversive treatment of the stock Loamshire comedy of sunny mornings and French windows’, *Observer*, 5 April 1992, *London Theatre Record*, 25 March-7 April, 1992, p. 387.

<sup>3</sup> Vera Brittain, *England’s Hour*, p. 198, quoted in Lassner, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society in Britain 1939-49*, London, 1989; Antonia Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema*, Oxford, 1991, Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain*, Oxford, 1995, Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson, *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996; Jeffrey Richards & Dorothy Sheridan (eds), *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> *Mrs Miniver* started life as a column on the Court page of *The Times*, before being turned into a highly successful Hollywood film that had practically nothing in common with Jan Struther’s original articles.

<sup>6</sup> Sheridan Morley, *John Gielgud: The Authorized Biography*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2002, pp. 183-84.

<sup>7</sup> Box 25, Dodie Smith Archive, in Dr Howard Gottlieb’s Twentieth-Century Archive, Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University, Massachusetts.

<sup>8</sup> Box 25, Dodie Smith Archive.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Slough’, in *John Betjeman: Collected Poems*, London: John Murray, pp. 20-21. See also Jessica Maynard, ‘Not the Sweet Home that it Looks: British Poetry, 1930-55’, in *Literature and Culture in Modern Britain, Volume Two: 1930-1955*, ed. Gary Day, London: Longman, 1997, pp. 28-49.

<sup>10</sup> As trades people, of course, the Randolphs have an entirely different ancestry from those who inhabit Manderley.

<sup>11</sup> Smith herself claimed, however, ‘I wasn’t out to alert people but to entertain them. Because I started writing during the thirties, there seems to be a feeling that I ought to have sounded grim warnings or something of the sort...one critic has already practically blamed me for starting the war, for Munich, the Spanish Civil War, and a few other things besides. I’m told it’s the idle people I created who were somehow responsible, which is a bit unfair as they all worked quite hard for a living’, *Scotsman*, April 11 1970.

<sup>12</sup> See Maggie B. Gale, ‘Dodie Smith’, in *The Cambridge Guide to Women’s Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p.585.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Alpers, ‘What is Pastoral?’, *Classical Enquiry*, 8.3, 1982, 437-60.

<sup>14</sup> Julie V. Gottlieb, ‘Vita Sackville-West’, in *The Cambridge Guide to Women’s Writing in English*, ed. Lorna Sage, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 550.



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