‘Moving Back to “Home” and “Nation:” Women Dramatists, 1938-1945’

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At the height of the Battle of Britain in August 1940, Winston Churchill commended the RAF, but also rallied the nation, by stating that ‘This is a war of the unknown warriors….The whole of the warring nations are engaged, not only soldiers, but the entire population, men, women and children. The fronts are everywhere. The trenches are dug in the towns and streets.’ (Calder 1969: 17). Implicit within this was the way the Second World War brought about a greater blurring of the political and domestic spheres than ever before, with men, women and children involved in what became known as the ‘People’s War.’ This was stressed in the media of the time, with radio, advertising, magazines, films, and plays, all working to boost the country’s morale through depictions of national and personal heroism, social cohesion, and domestic bliss.

Commentators such as Angus Calder and Alan Sinfield have argued that this mythopoesis hid the evidence of what happened when war broke away from its previous parameters of front line/home front. In relation to this, Judy Giles has recorded a series of further oppositional forces, which had implications for the positioning and representation of women during and after the War: ‘home/away (journey or voyage), stasis/movement, everyday/exceptional, private/public, traditional/modern, dependence/independence, feminine/masculine’ (Giles 2004: 141). It is possible to identify two forms of female ‘transit’ here. Women’s geographical movement can be described as ‘centrifugal’ as they travelled away from familiar, secure centres; a journey depicted, for example, in the films *Millions Like Us* and *The Gentle Sex* (both 1943), posters for female Service workers, and Laura Knight’s paintings. At the same time, a more ‘centripetal’ movement was taking place in the media; that is, an inwards trajectory towards the home and the community, as encapsulated by the figure of Jan Struther’s Mrs. Miniver.

Paradoxically, this focus on the local was achieved via the representation of ‘national’ qualities. Gillian Swanson notes how the family was placed within a debate about competing nationalistic forces, replicating the wider political struggles taking place across Europe. Here the British privileging of a ‘domestic femininity’ was in sharp contrast to Nazis’ “mechanistic” concept of state’ (Swanson 1996: 75-76). Certainly the majority of plays in the run up to the Second World War and for the

duration as well, including Dodie Smith's *Dear Octopus* (1938) and Esther McCracken's *Quiet Week-End* (1941), centre on the family, which embodied a number of crucial ideas: as a reminder of all Britain stood to lose, perceived middle class values of patriotism, loyalty, duty and responsibility, and strength of community, where the group becomes more important than the individual.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that the blurring of public/private space during the Second World War also effected a privileging of the female voice and experience by redrawing loci of work and home, and by politicising the domestic: we see this in Lesley Storm's *Great Day* (1945), Esther McCracken's *No Medals* (1944), and Daphne du Maurier's *The Year's Between* (1945). In doing this, some of the plays of the time can be seen to give female dramatists an opportunity to portray the tension between the mobile woman, who is required by the State to leave her home for the war effort, and the home-maker, who represents the traditional notion of womanhood, as well as looking to the reconstruction of a post-war Britain which would bring about a greater equality between the sexes. We find also that some female playwrights, such as Agatha Christie in *Ten Little Niggers* (1942), questioned the stability of the home itself – and therefore seditiously the nation - even if theatrical and social convention unsatisfactorily closes down this line of enquiry.

As I have argued elsewhere, dramas 'about the domesticated country house…played their role in proselytizing about how images of the middle-class family at home could help to win the war' (D'Monté 2008: 154). One of the smash hits of the war years was the revival of Dodie Smith's *Dear Octopus*, which was originally swept to success on a wave of relief over the Munich Crisis in September 1938. In this play, Smith positions the country house at the play's centre, presided over by Dora Randolph. The house represents solidity and tradition, with characters arriving for the Randolphs' silver wedding anniversary to find that little has changed. In an echo of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, the family retreat to the nursery, where memories of childhood position it as a prelapsarian place, safe from the vagaries of the outside world. Laurel, wife of one of the Randolphs' sons, is an only child, who revels in the longevity and continuity of an extended family. She tells her husband that she is thrilled to think that their baby is now 'sleeping in your father's nursery, with your father's old nurse looking after him' (Smith 1938: 35). Fenny, the secretary, is also attracted to the warmth and security of the household. She arrived 'looking exactly like little Orphan Annie' (Smith 1938: 35) and has ended up adopting the

Randolph family as her own; again, Cynthia, the black sheep, who has been living in Paris with her married lover, and career woman Hilda, are welcomed back into the fold, and their jangled nerves soothed. As matriarch, Dora is like an octopus whose tentacles reach out to encompass them all. She has a tendency to petty tyranny, jealousy and parsimoniousness, but she and her husband deal with any family disputes with a compassionate tolerance. Dora in particular is able to sympathetically communicate with everyone in the household, with the eldest son Nicholas noting 'Mother has an invincible happiness' (Smith 1938: 67).

Whilst *Dear Octopus* reflects on the waste and carnage wreaked between 1914-1918, it uses this to take up its position on the next war, where the role of the family is pivotal to assure victory. As Maggie Gale has pointed out, the play 'looks at the family as an emblem of newly threatened Nationhood' (Gale 1999: 585) at a moment when England was crucially teetering on the brink of war. 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. This is made clear by Nicholas's final toast, where he reminds the audience of the family's place at the heart of British life: 'It bends, it stretches – but it never breaks…To the family - that dear octopus from whose tentacles we never quite escape nor, in our inmost hearts, ever quite wish to' (Smith 1938: 88-89). What could, in another context, have been a picture of suffocating family life, is depicted at this time of war as part of the nation's armoury against the enemy, where the group is deemed more important the individual.

Esther McCracken's plays continue this idea. *Quiet Wedding*, which again was popular in the late 1930s, revived during the war years, and adapted for the screen by Terence Rattigan, concerns the domestic dramas of the Royd family. As the bombs rained down on the theatres during the Blitz, audiences could watch unfold on stage, a time when the nation was at peace. The insular sequel, *Quiet Week-End*, where the Royd family converge on their weekend cottage in the village of Throppleton was another major success during the war, running for nearly 1,300 performances. Like *Dear Octopus*, the family is again placed at the heart of English society, and in doing this it represents a community bound together by ties of deep-felt loyalty and mutual understanding. McCracken furthers this by fusing the domestic comedy with the pastoral idyll. During the Second World War, the image of the English village, with its gentle pace of rural life undisturbed by outside political events, is represented as an essential part of this country. Here we have a steadfast England forged out of a

common heritage, as in the concert party at the village hall, which ends with traditional folk songs. This idea of a Golden Age before the outbreak of war was picked up on by contemporary reviewers, with one commenting that ‘This glimpse of a very human and typically English family week-ending it at their cottage in the country in peace-time has an appeal of almost fairy-tale quality. To see it is to vow never again to take the simple pleasures of life for granted’ (Tanisch 2007: 122). McCracken’s deliberate focus upon exactly these qualities showed her ability to judge the mood of the moment, where the home was becoming increasingly splintered, and yet never more important.

Like the house in *Dear Octopus*, the décor is not ostentatious or even indicative of wealth, and the strong sense of kinship 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. The country house in Throppleton is deliberately troped as inclusive as servants, neighbours, relatives and friends meet in an idealistic representation of village life. *Quiet Weekend* encapsulates what Angus Calder called ‘Deep England’, with this nostalgia for essential English values, and a utopian rural setting, seen by Calder as part of the ‘myth’ of the Second World War: a place that only exists in the collective imagination, and not in reality (Calder 1992: 201).

Enormously popular plays like *Dear Octopus* and *Quiet Week-End* 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. Crucially, it did this in a way that was sometimes criticized as being too feminine, and therefore irrelevant. Lynton Hudson complained about how the influence of women led to a theatre based on ‘The ditherings of ordinary people seen through the magnifying glass of an observant sentimental humour’ (Hudson 1946: 59). However, more recently 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” ’ (Light 1991: 8).

Lesley Storm’s *Great Day* is also set in a village, but McCracken’s pastoral is replaced by one that is more contemporary, dealing as it does with the legacy of the Great War, female mobilization in the present war, and marital discord. The play

depicts members of the Women's Institute who put aside their differences to prepare for Eleanor Roosevelt's visit to their village.[1] Maureen Honey has argued, in relation to American propaganda during the Second World War, that 'The campaign to attract women into war production was part of a drive to weld the home front into an economic army, well disciplined, highly motivated by patriotism, and willing to make sacrifices' (Honey 1984: 6). It appears that this kind of State sponsored domesticity is being drawn upon in *Great Day*, when the women's work is described as turning the village into a 'powerful production unit' (Storm 1945: 1.14). At first glance, it appears as if the State's policy of drafting women into the workforce is rendered harmless to allay fears about the mobile woman, and to show the importance of working together as a community. It is made clear that their industrious efforts in providing vast amounts of food and clothing for the troops are an important contribution to the body politic, where 'we all have something to do with each other' (Storm 1945: 1.4).

However, there is something more interesting, and potentially subversive, at work here. The play is founded on the notion of community, but beyond this Storm specifies that it is the strength of the *female* group that is important, with one character remarking, not entirely comically, that she would go insane without the work and female companionship of the WI. Whilst there is grumbling about the privations of life during wartime, with one of the younger members feeling aggrieved that she has been called up for factory work, the women eventually gain strength from one another, and from finding an outlet for their talents. Mrs Roosevelt might be seen as the ultimate mobile woman in the way that she shoots 'across the world to look at factories and camps and things' (Storm 1945: 3.32), but the WI women equally achieve a sense of purpose through their work in the village. Going one stage further than *Dear Octopus, Quiet Wedding*, and *Quiet Weekend*, Storm suggests it is not just about coming together to support the war effort, but specifically about the power and potential of the female group to shape the future. The working woman is seen as essential to the war, and it is suggested that, after the cessation of battle, her abilities should be recognized. By elevating the position of what might have been perceived as lesser, so-called feminine, work, and having women outnumber the male characters on stage three to one, a sense of shared sisterhood and stature is created, which goes beyond the expected message about community and patriotism. Rather provocatively,

[1] This had to be taken off when Mrs. Roosevelt suddenly died.

the claim is made that if women work together, they may be able to influence alter the course of history through their housewifery methods, with one of the women making an addendum to the village as ‘a powerful production unit’: ‘We’re the beginnings of something new, make no mistake’ (Storm 1945: 1.16).

Esther McCracken complicates this idea of domesticity and the working woman in *No Medals* in 1944, by showing the tensions implicit between the State’s attempt to present images of happy families, and the reality of a woman’s life at this time. Set in a house in a port town, presided over by war widow, Martha Dacre, this play seems like others mentioned, related to the wider issue of war and nation, where the family and home are represented as a symbol of national pride. In Martha’s house, relatives, friends and strangers gather together, a cross-section of workers from the Navy, Air Force, factory, and fire watch. The play shows how the country is united in its battle against Germany, as ordinary people cope with extraordinary circumstances, something with which the Ministry of Information was fully concerned.

Martha’s stiff upper lip, stoicism, and patriotism, redolent of the English middle classes, also depicts the self-sacrificing woman, who always puts others first. Her name is aptronymic because she is one of the war’s unsung heroines who gets ‘no medals,’ but helps Britain on the road to victory without complaint. The focus is on her domestic life, with the minutiae of daily life represented in a way that had rarely been explored on stage in such detail before. There is the comedy value of a woman struggling heroically through her domestic duties and coping with the problems caused by rationing and austerity. Indeed the cry by one of the characters of ‘Quick! Quick! The fishmonger’s got fish!’(McCracken 1947: 37), always got a laugh of recognition from audiences during the latter part of the war years. This can be recognized as an emblematic gesture of communality gained through the commonplace. Antonia Lant makes a similar comment of Mrs. Miniver’s rose in the filmed version of Jan Struther’s columns for *The Times*: ‘As familiar daily routines disappeared, surviving ones acquired a peculiar, symbolic glow: rearing a champion marrow became an act of patriotism; sighting an orange a precious glimpse of peace. Domestic life lurched from the epitome of the ordinary to the quintessence of the extraordinary’ (Lant 1996: 13). In *No Medals*, we see Martha’s acts of housewifery as a means of bringing cohesion to the household, and therefore to the nation.

However, the stoic woman in her home belies the facts of the play, which consistently dwells on the unpalatable truths about war: bombing raids, family

dislocation, and constant fear of death. Martha even makes a sideswipe at the media's myth-making, saying that people like her only get acknowledgement in the form of 'the annual word through the BBC, given as a sop to keep us at it' (McCracken 1947: 37). As well as serving the family, she works for the Red Cross fund, the Canteen, the Fire Watch, and sells savings stamps door to door. She is in a state of almost permanent exhaustion, often working through the night, or taking on other people's shifts to help out. Whenever Martha is on stage, which is for most of the play, she is involved in some sort of domestic activity, sometimes several at once. Although she has made it as comfortable as possible, the house in which they live is not their home, which has been destroyed in the Blitz; rather, it is temporary, rented accommodation, with all their possessions placed in storage. There is no privacy as the private space has been opened up to the public: relations, friends and neighbours trip in and out constantly. It even houses a cuckoo in the nest in the form of a young navy man who claims his ship has been torpedoed, but in actuality is a con artist who tricks well-meaning people out of their money. There are two main points of tension in the play. It is feared that Martha's son and son-in-law have been killed during an attack on their ship, and the memory of the HMS Rawalpindi, a ship bombed in 1939 with the loss of 238 lives, hangs over them. Theatrical conventions demand that, as a comedy, the play ends happily, but not before Martha suffers a nervous collapse. Also, because the Government was now calling up women in the 45-50 age range, Martha's household fears she will leave to join the services, especially as she believes it would be easier than juggling several different jobs and looking after the family.

In analyzing films about the 'home front', Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson state how these 'emphasise female roles and domestic concerns. The centrality of "woman" as a sign capable of securing the identity of nation as "home" sits uneasily with policies conscripting women into war work and the governmental address to "mobilize women", as well as with the increase in women's political activism' (Gledhill and Swanson 1996: 5) Good housewifery became a means of showing patriotism. Thrifty shopping, nutritious preparation of meals, and careful cleaning were all depicted as a woman's part of helping the war effort. Yet equally a woman's place in the factory, the field, or the services, was crucial to the war effort. This figure of the 'mobile woman', as Antonia Lant explains,

> sapped the idea of nation from within; mass mobilisation undermined traditional notions of civil stability in which the sexes had clearly defined roles and in which a woman's place was at home. Women could no longer be counted on to be at home – indeed they were now required by law not to be. The idea of home could hardly function as a synecdoche for national unity (as it had in earlier wars) when it now contained no family, few women, fewer men, and was physically being destroyed (Lant 1996: 15-16).

This conflict can be seen more prevalently in Daphne du Maurier's *The Years Between* where it is the returning war hero who disrupts the household, rather than the mobile woman who goes out to work. It is significant that du Maurier's play predates the end of the war by a few months. It was first staged on January 10th 1945. As VE Day was not until May 8th, the play was therefore written before the end of the war, but significantly goes beyond this time to talk about the reconstruction of the country and of Europe in peace. This work displays the tensions evident elsewhere between the propagandist messages of the State, and the desire of female dramatists to display the growing freedom afforded their sex. In it, Diana's husband, Michael, has gone missing and is presumed dead. In his absence, the heroine successfully takes on his role as MP, and is due to marry Richard, a neighbouring farmer. We see her transform from a 'quiet and subdued' (du Maurier 1994: 337) thirty-five-year-old mother and wife into a career woman, who is empowered through being able to use the political sphere to change her own life and that of others. When her husband unexpectedly returns, on the eve of her wedding day, it is revealed that he had been working underground in Europe helping the Resistance. Whereas Michael has sacrificed his family for his patriotic duty, Diana finds herself expected to return to her pre-war existence as wife and mother. At the time, audiences were far more sympathetic to the husband, because patriotic duty was deemed more important than personal feeling. Moreover, it was considered appropriate that women take on traditional male roles 'only for the duration;' at the end of the war, there would be a return to 'normality' ' (Higgonet, et al 1987: 7) But in this play, it is Michael who is seen as out of place in this new environment, desperate to return to the security of the past, where gender roles were less in flux. In contrast, Diana sees her work as part of a continuum of change, which will bring about a new kind of society.

The original title of the play was *The Return of the Soldier*, already used by Rebecca West for a novel about the First World War, but du Maurier's new title – *The Years Between* – serves several purposes. It draws attention to the emotional divide between husband and wife, caused by their different experiences and understanding of war. Michael has been at the sharp end of hostilities, involved abroad in dangerous and difficult work - the details are vague - but we are assured that he has been heroic. During this time, he tells his wife, 'I used to make pictures of this house, this room. I saw nothing changed. And I'm not the only one. Thousands of us…They want the life they know – the woman they love' (du Maurier 1994: 366). Thus, it has been claimed, that whilst war would 'paradoxically… unleash[es] aggressiveness in defense of civilization…Images of femininity, nurturance, and the family can be invoked to restore the balance and protect our faith in the social order' (Higgonet, et al 1987: 1). In contrast, though, Diana's war on the Home Front has led to a realignment of her life to bring together the domestic and the political spheres in a way that connects female fulfillment with social change. The merging of the public and private has taken place in a way that did not ordinarily happen for women of Diana's class.

This is signalled through the changes du Maurier makes to the setting, which represent the seismic shift taking place for women. The play opens in a musty library filled with masculine props, marking this out very much as a male space. By Act 2, when Diana now believes her husband to be dead, the setting remains the same, but it 'somehow has a different air. It is no longer a man's room, where he would browse among his books' (du Maurier 1994: 348). Feminine touches have been added, and while Diana's political speeches take place off stage, the house is filled with letters from constituents, and other evidence of her working life. When Michael returns, he does not recognize the timid, submissive wife he left behind, seeing her now as 'one of those managing, restless women' (du Maurier 1994: 373), and he longs for the sureties of their prewar existence. Significantly, the stage directions state that after Michael's return, 'There has been an effort to return the room to its original state as in scene 1, but this has not been entirely successful. Perhaps Nanny and Diana have forgotten where everything stood' (du Maurier 1994: 357). This spatial defiance becomes a way of tangibly showing - for both male and female members of the audience - the impossibility of returning to the past. New gender lines have been drawn up, with women able to move beyond their previous roles, even if, for the time being, they are still renegotiating this space through the image of the home.

Unlike the film adaptation, directed by Compton Bennett in 1946, the play does not offer easy closure. Diana may agree to give up her career at any moment her husband demands it, but there is an ambiguity about their continuing relationship. Both will become involved in the reconstruction of a new society, Michael in Europe, and Diana in Britain. Under the cover of working for the common good, husband and wife effectively live apart, and Diana becomes a single mother. The motif of the separation and reuniting of families is used as a way of representing the nation's recent experiences, but beyond this, du Maurier shows the difficulties inherent in the post-war period, where things cannot be as they once were. So it becomes significant that the play ends with Diana changing her speech to the Girls' Training Corps, replacing the words 'our children shall be brought up to service, duty and obedience to the State' to 'We hope to build a wiser, happier Britain, where our children and ourselves shall grow in courage, faith and understanding' (du Maurier 1994: 397). The message is made that in the rebuilding of post-war Britain, there is a need for women and men to work alongside one another to create better social community where equality becomes the key, rather than blind service to the state.

One other significant way in which representations of the home ran counter to the idea of the cosy, domesticated space, was in some of the most popular genres of the war, the Gothic, the thriller, and the murder mystery. Like the bombing raids and telegram deliveries, they bring an acceptable engagement with death to the audience: murder has been framed within understandable boundaries, where the hunt for the enemy became a game, and the threatened chaos to society is brought under control by the end of the evening. Given the German *blitzkrieg*, the home had become an unstable concept, a place of terror, which speaks of the dangers without. There is an impossibility of talking about the genocide taking place in Europe, or the cruelties and ambiguities of war, so instead fictional violence is rendered 'homely'. In speaking of the 'women's film' during the 1940s, Mary Ann Doane argues that 'The home is not a homogeneous place – it asserts divisions, gaps and field within its very structure' (Doane 1987: 287). Agatha Christie is one of the most successful proponents of this form of 'domesticated' instability. Her work focuses on the middle class values of continuity and stability, but as Anna-Maria Taylor has said, it 'also plays on ideas of *Home*' (Taylor 1990: 148). This reaches its apogee in the Miss Marple novels, which first appeared in 1930, and were then taken up again from the Second World War onwards.

Christie's plays also provide a twist on the concept of 'home,' particularly in the way they feature closed communities, as in *Ten Little Niggers* (later known as *And Then There Were None*). Her formula is this latter play, is simple, but effective: a seemingly random group of people are brought to an island off the coast of Devon, and one by one disposed of, according to the nursery rhyme, 'Ten Little Indians'. We can even see here a reworking of the country house motif, where the characters are invited to a luxuriously furnished residence supposedly owned by their host, who has been given the name U. N. Owen, or Unknown. Because of their isolated location, the ten of them are unable to flee to safety, and it becomes obvious that the murderer is one of the group, which consists of a cross-section of gender, class, age and profession.

Here the island setting has two important functions. Holger Klein notes that 'Before the Germans conceived the wobbly "Festung Europa", people in Britain had come to think of themselves as living in a "Fortress" ' (Klein 1984: 8), ever since the disaster of Dunkirk in 1940. In Christie's play we have a representation of Britain, the island state threatened with oblivion by unseen forces. We are exposed to the exact opposite of a community, one where there is no kinship or cooperative spirit; this is the daily fear of Churchill's government, but here negated by the murder mystery formula. The isolated house brings about a feeling of extreme dislocation, as the characters, who are all positioned as potential victims or murderers, detectives or jurors, begin to lose a sense of their own identity, and that of the group threatens rather than comforts. Imitating the state of war, facts can no longer be relied on to be true, neighbours could turn out to be enemies, and people die with increasing regularity

Stephen Knight informs us that the murder mystery requires an 'emotionless treatment of death,' (Knight 1980: 115), because the focus is on detection rather than cause. This certainly reflects the State's attempts to deflect attention away from the physical violence involved in war, and the need for stoicism in the face of death. However, Christie's connection between the British establishment and murder, particularly given that the murderer is a judge is called Wargrave, is curious. Consciously or unconsciously, this female doyenne of the cosy and familiar has represented the ambiguity of war by giving us a disquisition on notions of justice, as well as representing the immediate reality for the audience of the blurred boundary between front line/home front. Although the murder mystery allows the audience to

comfortably come face to face with death, there is no doubt that the setting, like the Gothic house in other works of the time, replicates the fracturing of the household during wartime, where the threat from without has become the menace within.

As the editors of *War Plays by Women* remind us: 'Hegemonic histories tend to concentrate on battles, politico-military strategy, and changes in maps and boundaries. Above all, like dominant war drama, the focus is on male experience at the battlefront. By contrast, women's history/plays are more likely to focus on women's experience behind the lines, especially on the home front' (Tylee, et al 1999: 1). This is true of the drama mentioned, where there is a continual awareness of the symbolic meaning of gendered space during a time of war, whether as a means of supporting the propagandist policies of the government, or as a way of subverting it. The familiar choice of genre, whether of family comedy, domestic drama, or thriller, all have a readily recognizable formula, providing the perfect medium through which to transmit a message about the importance of the family and community, or of allowing audiences to face their fears about death. Nevertheless, we can detect within these accepted subject matters and forms, fissures of fear or discontent: with the dangers of the war, with prevailing social structures, and with the role of women. The increased 'porosity of public/private divide' (Gomez Reus and Usandizaga 2008: 24) became a way for women to posit the need for a new society in the post-war period. If, during the 1950s, the notion of hearth and home was reinvigorated and the value of the family as a symbol of national pride and unity carried through the media, the Second World War had already prompted a series of social and cultural interrogations which would have implications for future decades. Here binary oppositions of home/away, private/public, masculine/feminine, and the like, were no longer polarised, but functioned instead to produce new synergies between gender, place, and space, all of which were 'in transit.'

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