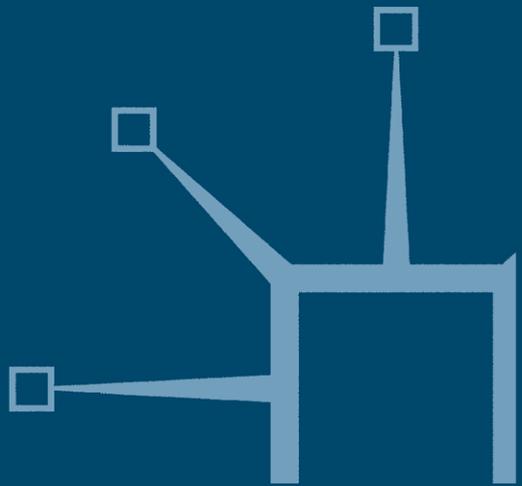


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Middlebrow Feminism in Classic British Detective Fiction

The Female Gentleman

Melissa Schaub



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Middlebrow Feminism in Classic British Detective Fiction

The Female Gentleman

Melissa Schaub

University of North Carolina, Pembroke, USA

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For Frank and David

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Preface

During the late nineteenth century, literature developed a tiered hierarchy, as highbrow literature separated itself from lowbrow fiction; the transformation was completed in the early twentieth century by the addition of a middle category. Modernist writers began to see themselves as set apart from society, and as alienated even from many readers whom Victorians would have considered cultured. So the term 'middlebrow' was coined, to designate, often pejoratively, any serious writer whose work was accessible to a wider audience than the avant-garde. One result of this stratification was the invention of the genre labels still used by publishers today to imprint the spines of paperbacks. Detective fiction was both the most popular and the most intellectually respectable of these genres, and therefore it was the form where high and low were most likely to mingle and become middlebrow.

Middlebrow fiction of the modernist period undertook to educate its middle-class readers, as Victorian literature had done but avant-garde modernists would not, and has therefore been all the more scorned by highbrows of its own period, and of ours. Yet detective fiction of that 'Golden Age' is still widely read and enjoyed today, and the social interventions it performed in its own period warrant a more nuanced assessment than is common in scholarly histories of the genre. Middlebrow novels in general, and detective novels in particular, pursued their ideological transformations of readers by their presentation of characters with whom readers would wish to identify. Ideal characters of both sexes were consistently and frequently depicted as gentlemen, thus producing an ideological composite that was mildly conservative in its approach to social class, but progressive in its approach to gender. Were Margery Allingham, Agatha Christie, Georgette Heyer, Ngaio Marsh, or Dorothy L. Sayers feminists? Critics disagree, but the most common scholarly answer to that question is No. By examining more fully the interactions between class and gender ideology in their novels, and by setting them within the wider context of middlebrow literary history, I hope to change that answer to a qualified Yes.

Of course, one cannot write a book like this without being an avid reader of the genre, and therefore I know that one of the pleasures

of these texts is solving the puzzle and figuring out whodunit before the detective does. I have therefore tried not to spoil the endings of the novels I write about. It was unavoidable in several cases, where the resolution of the plot or the mechanism of the murder were integral to the theme. Most readers who would pick up this book probably already know how *Death on the Nile* or *Gaudy Night* end, however, and I hope I can be forgiven for giving away the endings of a few other novels as well.

This study of feminism in detective fiction began its life long before I became a literary scholar. Although the focus of the book is to explain what a commonly recurring character type, whom I have named the Female Gentleman, can tell us about both the history of feminism and the ideology of British middlebrow literature between the wars, its purpose is also, in some part, to explain me to myself. Every scholar of literature came to the profession through a love of books. We are not always willing to acknowledge *which* books we loved first, however, and I hope to change that. In this volume I come to the conclusion that even a form almost universally criticized by scholars for its conservative underpinnings – the Golden Age mystery novel by female authors like Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers – can shape its readers into feminists.

No intellectual history can be written without the aid of many people and organizations. I am grateful for the financial support of the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, and particularly its Teaching and Learning Center, which awarded me a Summer Research Fellowship in 2010; and for the encouragement of many colleagues both inside and outside the Department of English and Theatre. My children deserve acknowledgment for the many hours of time with me they generously sacrificed. I began working on this project, which I originally conceived of as an article, while I was pregnant with my younger child, and therefore he has been sharing my attention with the Female Gentleman for his entire life. My mother deserves the credit for having sparked my love of classic detective fiction and Regency romances in the first place, and for being able to suggest other volumes I might read as I expanded this project into a book. My largest debt of gratitude, as always, is owed to my most important colleague, who is also my husband, for his patience in reading drafts and his insight in suggesting revisions. I could never have completed this volume without his support.

1

Introduction: Middlebrow Women and Detective Fiction

In *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937), the final full-length Lord Peter Wimsey novel, Dorothy L. Sayers explores in detail the dynamics of marriage between two professionals. After their first real fight, Harriet Vane apologizes to Lord Peter, her new husband, by vehemently rejecting any possibility that she will resort to the emotional and sexual tactics she has seen other women use:

“My husband would do *anything* for me. ...” It’s degrading. No human being ought to have such power over another.’

‘It’s a very real power, Harriet.’

‘Then,’ she flung back passionately, ‘we won’t use it. If we disagree, we’ll fight it out like gentlemen. We won’t stand for matrimonial blackmail.’¹

Harriet’s desire to fight like a gentleman makes explicit a common thread in similar novels by British women of the early twentieth century. Recurring characters like Harriet Vane, Ngaio Marsh’s Agatha Troy, Agatha Christie’s Tuppence Beresford, Margery Allingham’s Amanda Fitton, and dozens of non-recurring characters in all these women’s novels – plus those of Georgette Heyer and other middlebrow authors of the period – all distinguish themselves as heroines by acting like gentlemen. Not all use the word explicitly, but all embody a remarkably consistent code of behavior and set of personality traits. This frequently occurring character type, which I will call the Female Gentleman, is a representative example of the unrecognized feminism of middlebrow British novels; their aspirations can still be relevant to readers today.

2 *Middlebrow Feminism in Classic British Detective Fiction*

During the years after World War I, British cultural norms in the areas of gender and class changed radically. Fiction of the era changed in response, both in form and in content. The history of literary modernism's response to social change has been frequently rehearsed and well documented; in general, highbrow authors followed a pattern of withdrawal from mass culture and social change, and promoted instead an image of the artist as an isolated, visionary figure whose politics were, if anything, conservative. But high literary modernism comprises only a small fraction of the novelistic production of the era. Writers working in popular forms like the mystery or romance differed sharply from their more avant-garde contemporaries not only in their attitudes toward changing social norms, but also in their style and tone. Mystery novels by women, in particular, took on an interesting and repeated set of similarities in form and content, combining a light ironic tone with a consistently ambiguous feminism. If Andreas Huyssen is right that mass culture was the feminized 'other' of high modernism,² then female novelists such as Dorothy L. Sayers, Ngaio Marsh, and Georgette Heyer were very other indeed. Their otherness has been reproduced in scholarship, as relatively few literary historians have investigated the authors I will examine here. Some good work on 'middlebrow' forms has been done, but with more emphasis on American authors than on British ones. Histories of detective fiction, meanwhile, tend to dismiss the so-called Golden Age³ novels of these female authors as too conservative and conventional to be literary, giving more attention to the American hard-boiled category. Nevertheless, British women mystery novelists are worth attending to; their amalgamation of forward-looking gender politics with backward-looking class politics is unique. In volume after volume, these novels depict a consistent ideal of female behavior, a feminist reappropriation of the Victorian ideal of middle-class masculinity. The Female Gentleman unites old ideas about class with new ideas about gender, in a combination that sheds light on today's feminisms. Because the tone of these Golden Age mystery novels is so much more like that of contemporary speech than any literary modernist novel is, I believe that Sayers, Christie, and their peers are more likely to influence today's readers who pick up their books than Joyce and Lawrence are, and because of their wide and ongoing distribution in print, it is important to understand exactly what that influence might be.

The first step in understanding the influence of these novels is clarifying their social background. I would argue, against the grain of modern scholarship, that the central class concept of popular British culture of the interwar period was that of the 'gentleman'. Many commentators on the concept of the 'gentleman' in British society have felt that by the 1920s the idea was dead, democratized out of existence. This is a common thread in histories of gentlemanliness that span the Renaissance to the late Victorian era, which all tend to trace a similar narrative. A word that began as a strict indicator of rank – 'gentle' meaning well-born or of good blood – became more complicated through its application in the eighteenth century to moral qualities as well as class position. The rise of the middle class was facilitated by their annexation of the term gentleman, as they altered it to express virtues of behavior and manner rather than those of family or rank.⁴ During the nineteenth century, the conflicts between the two ways of defining the gentleman were a fruitful source of literary material, and also key to the transformation of British society. The fact that many people were able to call themselves gentlemen and so identify with the interests of the upper classes allowed Britain to avoid a revolution and assimilate the industrial *nouveau riche* and the lower middle classes into a new class structure for society, according to many commentators. But the process of broadening the term gentleman accelerated so quickly by the end of the century that shop clerks were claiming it, and most historians end their narratives at this point: 'The English gentleman did not die, or simply fade away; he was overtaken by social inflation.'⁵ However, this is a limited view, perhaps inevitable because literary scholars who study gentlemanliness tend to be Victorian specialists; class has been much less interesting a concept to scholars of modernism. But while 'gentleman' may have become a contested term after World War I, every interwar British novel still operates under its shadow, even when the word itself is not explicitly invoked. Gentlemanliness was still a desired state, and middlebrow novelists used its desirability to leverage their vision of women's progress by co-opting it for their own use. After World War II, there was a far more profound shift in British thinking about class; when 'gentleman' lost its last vestige of desirability, sometime in the 1950s, women authors stopped writing Female Gentleman novels.⁶

At the same time that the class structure of English society was undergoing radical shifts, gender roles were changing as well. The

self-conscious high culture split from mass culture that Huysen calls the 'great divide' relied on an explicit othering of textual productions deemed to be inferior and feminine. Avant-garde experimentation with both formal conventions and language itself has been largely accepted today as the hallmark of 'modernism'. Such literary experimentalism was regarded for many decades as a masculine pursuit, and the accepted canon of modernist authors was largely male.⁷ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have depicted avant-garde experimentalism as a 'reaction-formation of intensified misogyny with which male writers greeted the entrance of women into the literary marketplace' in the late nineteenth century, a reaction-formation of 'murderous intensity'.⁸ But an array of feminist scholars has, largely successfully, broken up this closed canon and argued for the centrality of gender to the creation of modernism's signature literary forms, including its linguistic experimentation, which can be seen as radically feminine. The ambiguity depends largely on which literary techniques of high modernism one sees as central to the form: the 'cool, tough detachment' in attitude, or the 'indeterminacy, multiplicity, and fragmentation' that can lead one to associate the modernist style with *écriture féminine*.⁹ High modernists' 'anxiety of contamination'¹⁰ by feminized mass culture, exacerbated by the blows to masculine identity delivered by the Great War, resulted in many modernist texts that were aggressively masculine, and just as many that seem *féminine* instead. The detachment that marks many high modernist texts can sometimes turn into irony, but far more often the tone of these novels is 'haunted'.¹¹ From Stephen Dedalus' vision of hell, to Septimus Smith's shell shock hallucinations, modernism's tone is lyrical, intense, and ghostly, both women and men haunted by the scars of their battle of the sexes, as well as the battles of World War I.

That 'haunted' or 'murderous' intensity is not present in the novels I examine in this study – even though most of them are murder mysteries. The transformations of class and gender that shaped high modernism operated equally on less highbrow writing, but with very different results. Middlebrow cultural productions represented the new gender norms after World War I with the same rational detachment that highbrow authors did, but with considerably more irony – comical rather than lyrically intense or haunted. Many scholars of detective fiction have noted the playful quality of Golden Age mysteries when contrasted with the darker crime fiction of today's authors; but that

playful tone is common to much fiction of the period, not just detective fiction. The difference in tone maps onto a significant difference in politics as well. In *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, Nicola Humble describes the new gender norms: 'The new man of this moment rejected the old masculine values of gravitas and heroism in favour of frivolity and an effete and brittle manner. The new woman took on the practicality and emotional control once the province of the male: she was competent, assured, and unemotional.'¹² The most interesting feature of this new ideal of women's behavior is that it so closely resembles the older ideal of gentlemanliness that World War I was said to have destroyed, especially in the area of emotional self-control. In other words, in the works of mystery, romance, and other middlebrow novelists, moderately feminist women of the 1920s through the 1950s were urged to act like gentlemen.

The 'effeteness' of male detectives in Golden Age novels has been frequently noted in works on detective fiction, leading many scholars of detective fiction to see the novels of Christie and company as 'feminized'¹³ and therefore culturally conservative. This designation essentially reproduces the cultural politics of avant-garde highbrow modernism, as one subcategory of middlebrow fiction is deemed to be less authentic, groundbreaking, or radical than another, based on dubious gender politics. Most older detective fiction criticism completely embraced the common but facile equation of 'feminine' with 'conservative', and more recent feminist scholars have not been as successful in overturning the resulting faulty judgment of middlebrow women authors as they have with highbrow modernists. Middlebrow genre fiction displays no exaggerated alienation from society, but that does not make it less important than either high modernism or the hard-boiled American private-eye novels preferred by many scholars of detective fiction.

Like most middlebrow writers, the authors I will examine were popular and influential in their own day, despite the scathing reviews of high-culture critics. Perhaps more significantly, all the novelists I have named have continued to be popular, in both England and America.¹⁴ None of them has ever been out of print since first being published,¹⁵ and all of their novels are periodically reissued by various publishers in paperback. Georgette Heyer has been especially influential because she founded a particular subgenre of romance novel, the Regency romance; the current authors of this subgenre all follow to varying

degrees the formula laid down by Heyer, the 'queen of the Regency romance' (as Harper proclaimed her on the covers of their early 1990s era reprints). A later Harlequin reprint series carried forewords written by contemporary Regency romance novelists, introducing Heyer to the 1990s reader, and discussing Heyer's influence on their own early reading and writing. Given the number of bestselling authors Harlequin was able to find for this series, it is clear that Heyer's principles have had influence well beyond her own oeuvre. Dorothy L. Sayers also influenced other writers, through her role as a founding member of the Detection Club (a social organization of mystery authors founded in the late 1920s in London, and still in existence today) and her frequent essays about the art of detective writing, found in introductions to collections and in articles for the popular press. More broadly, the genres in which these authors wrote, the detective novel and the romance, have been the most popular genres among adult readers from the beginning of the twentieth century to the end.¹⁶

I myself read works by most of these authors as a teenager, long before I encountered any high literary modernist. I love Virginia Woolf with the intellectual love of an adult, but I love Georgette Heyer with the deeply passionate emotional attachment reserved for the favorite texts of one's youth. I suspect that Heyer had a much more formative influence on my character, for precisely that reason. Clive Bloom's definition of the difference between popular fiction and literary fiction makes clear why this should be; in *Bestsellers*, he argues that 'Art fiction highlights its style, delights in it and makes of style a fetish. Popular fiction neutralises style ... and delights in making language invisible' so that it 'releases a desire in language to become the very life that is being portrayed by it'.¹⁷ Popular fiction, then, by its very nature, will effect more direct changes in the lives of its readers than literary fiction can, because literary fiction always focuses at least as much attention on its construction and language as it does on its characterization. While I would argue that all realist fiction, including 'art fiction', influences its readers by making its world seem so real that readers act as if they had become a part of it, I certainly do agree that characterization is one of the most important means by which it does so, and Female Gentleman novels rely heavily on characterization and dialogue for their effects.

There is a second central technique of realist fiction, however: irony. The subtleties of narrative point of view in popular fiction are poorly

accounted for by binary models like Huyssen's or Bloom's that leave no room for a middle position between high culture and mass or popular culture. Yet modernist authors themselves recognized the influence of those middlebrow cultural productions, even while deploring it. To be middlebrow is to be more than simply a bit more serious than other popular novels. Like other middlebrow fiction of the early twentieth century, Female Gentleman novels relish language for its tonal properties, exploring irony and wit in all their different permutations. Only rarely do they pursue their liking for ellipsis and irony to the extent of becoming as opaque as their high modernist contemporaries, for to do so is to risk losing their audience; of the five main authors in my study, Margery Allingham, who was the most prone to linguistic experimentation, is also the least known today. But neither do they ever let language disappear into invisibility. I will examine both mysteries and romances in the course of this study, and I hope to be able to treat them seriously as literature, but not so seriously that their language becomes a fetish obscuring their effect in the world.

Part of my motivation for this investigation is the same as Janice Radway's for her seminal study of American middlebrow novels, *A Feeling for Books*.¹⁸ She devotes the first chapter of that investigation to a personal reading history, probing the intense emotional conflict caused by her love of the Book-of-the-Month Club novels she read in her youth and the scorn with which her graduate school professors and fellow students referred to such texts. I know that I am not the only feminist literary scholar who started life reading mysteries, science fiction, and romances, and who feels a sneaking shame over it. One male graduate school friend of mine said dismissively that he had read all of Agatha Christie's novels in high school, but hadn't been able to find her interesting since then. I have never yet met a literary scholar who will admit to having read Georgette Heyer at any age. I began this study by trying to determine whether I became a scholar and a feminist despite having read *These Old Shades* at the tender age of 14, or because of it. I believe the latter to be true, and I hope that the effect these novels had on me will continue for at least a few more generations.

The history of gentlemanliness

What is the 'Female Gentleman'? She is, of course, a composite creature, with some traits emphasized more by some authors than

others. But the core of the ideal is a woman who is competent, courageous, and self-reliant in practical situations, capable of subordinating her emotions to reason and the personal good to the social good, and possessed of 'honor' in the oldest sense of the term. These are personality traits, corresponding with the moral aspect of Victorian gentlemanliness. Most of the characters who fill the Female Gentleman role also fulfill the more archaic class aspect of gentlemanliness through birth or breeding, but with significant revision consistent with the class negotiations performed by the middlebrow novel as a whole.

This list of traits – well-bred, courageous, honorable, and rational – produces a model of female behavior which is recognizably feminist in its implications when contrasted with the Victorian Angel in the House, but problematic for a twenty-first-century reader because of its emphasis on concepts like honor and birth. Of course, as David Castronovo points out, the old-fashioned aspects of gentlemanliness were the very source of its attraction as a concept in the nineteenth century, and not much has changed. The middle classes might have wanted to make gentlemanliness primarily a moral category in order to be able to claim it for themselves, but 'no amount of moralizing ever really destroys the magic component of pedigree' or the 'fantasy connected with blood'.¹⁹ While Castronovo is discussing the novels of Anthony Trollope in this paragraph, his switch to the present tense seems to be a comment on his contemporaries of the 1980s as well, and I would certainly agree with his assessment. If anything, readers of the early twenty-first century (especially Americans) are even more prone to fantasy excitement about pedigree than Victorian Britons were, and titled characters are a universal component of current American Regency romances that imitate Heyer. The snob value of gentlemanliness as a model for feminism complicates the value for today's reader of the code of Female Gentlemanliness contained in these novels.

In order to understand the seemingly contradictory traits of the Female Gentleman – rational feminism, romantic snobbery – it is necessary to trace the history of gentlemanliness, since the contradiction is as much a part of the definition of 'gentleman' itself as it is a result of adding the term 'female'. Contradiction and ambiguity were hallmarks of the concept of the gentleman throughout the nineteenth century, and indeed were fundamental to its success and

appeal. Scholars unite in tracing this ambiguity to the term's possession of two distinct aspects, the social and the moral, which sometimes conflicted. The social aspect was older, rooted in the medieval system of rank. Because the meaning of the term was so vague in the Renaissance, it was a rank that was open in its membership, not fixed in any legal or permanent sense. A man who had risen in trade could not become a duke, but he could style himself a gentleman. Once industrialists were doing so in large numbers in the eighteenth century, the middle class began a concerted effort to target the rank of gentleman and redefine it for their own use, particularly by including moral components. Anyone can hope to achieve such traits by their own behavior, whereas birth is fixed and unchangeable. Adding a moral component to gentlemanliness gave it a certain kind of appeal, yet its roots in the medieval system of rank meant that it was still exclusive enough that not everyone could achieve the title, giving it a different kind of appeal as well.

The moralization of the term gentleman coincided with a continuing democratization of the concept throughout the nineteenth century, a democratization that at least one author credits with nothing less than the Victorian Compromise – the gradual remaking of British society that averted revolution.²⁰ But as Karen Waters points out, the very fact that gentlemanliness was now achievable through moral means, yet still carried a social component, made it both paradoxical and difficult to acquire. Conduct literature could give one lists of traits to strive for. But the old social concept of breeding meant that there was a conflict between seeing such gentlemanly traits as 'innate' and believing them to be 'acquired'.²¹ Can honor be bred into a person in any literal sense? Even in the late nineteenth century, many people still thought so, yet a whole industry arose to inform others how to acquire it artificially, or simulate it successfully.

Waters adduces this paradox at length in order to make the point that gentlemanliness was an artificial concept both on the level of class and on the level of gender. If honor can be acquired, why cannot women acquire it? This question took on new urgency at the beginning of the twentieth century, and Robin Gilmour sees the complete disappearance of the gentleman from modernist literature as a sign that gender became the more dominant concept of the period, rather than class.²² Gilmour is basically correct, as one can see by comparing lists of titles of books about Victorian literature and

books about modernist literature; the scholarly focus switches quite dramatically from class to gender as one crosses the turn of the century. Yet class issues remain vital to the cultural reception of modernism today. Sean Latham makes explicit what most literary scholars know but do not admit, that much of the ongoing appeal of high modernism to today's readers is 'snob appeal', in that the texts of the period are 'icons of cultural capital'.²³ Liking T. S. Eliot or James Joyce is the sign of higher education, which has been the key component of gentlemanliness since the late nineteenth century.²⁴ One might argue that liking Dorothy Sayers rather than the latest quilting- or vampire-themed mystery provides similar cultural capital. Thus, both the highbrow and middlebrow novels of the modernist period have snob value for readers of the twenty-first century. The survival of both types of novels depends on unfortunate cultural politics – the first can be a way to show off one's educational superiority, the second appeals to the same impulse behind the otherwise inexplicable phenomenon of Americans idolizing Princess Diana and tuning in for Kate Middleton's wedding. But only Female Gentleman novels attempt to combine their class politics with feminism, and that combination is both interesting and problematic.

The rise of the middlebrow

Social history is only one context within which the Female Gentleman must be situated. A more complex and vexed context is literary history. The vast majority of the novels I will examine in this study fall into the category of detective fiction, one of the two dominant genres of popular fiction in the twentieth century. Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham, and Ngaio Marsh are all known today primarily or only as mystery novelists, even though most of them also wrote other kinds of fiction or non-fiction during their careers. Georgette Heyer, by contrast, is known today primarily as a romance novelist, though she wrote more detective fiction during the 1930s than romances. This is not a book solely about detective fiction. However, the history and critical reception of the detective fiction genre provide an important literary context for the Female Gentleman. Before examining it, however, it is important to situate these novels within the wider context of interwar middlebrow fiction (of which detective fiction is only one category). I began that

work earlier, describing the gender and class politics of high literary modernism as one possible response to the social changes of the period. Middlebrow fiction represents another possible response to those social changes, and to understand the Female Gentleman it is necessary to discuss the middlebrow in more depth first.

The borders of the middlebrow are hard to define. The term dates from the 1920s, when it was coined by cultural commentators in both Britain and America to describe, often pejoratively, middle-class readers who aspired to higher culture but did not like the avant-garde. The term could be as neutral as a synonym for the 'fairly civilized, fairly literate',²⁵ or as vitriolic as Virginia Woolf's 'bloodless and pernicious pest'.²⁶ Woolf's own use of the terminology in her essay 'Middlebrow' is more playfully ironic than this quotation might imply. But the negative connotation has been taken up without irony among scholars; as Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith summarize it in their anthology of middlebrow American women's writing, the middlebrow has been seen as 'lacking the cachet and edginess of high culture' and simultaneously 'in want of the authenticity of the low'; conservative both aesthetically and politically; and, most significantly, 'feminized'.²⁷ Conservative and feminized are the same positions detective fiction scholars assign Golden Age authors in relation to the rest of the genre. The two terms are seen to go hand in hand; that is, a literature that is feminine must be conservative. The equation of the two terms, I believe, is an artifact of the long dominance of high literary modernism, with its almost violent insistence on the masculinity of avant-garde expression as alienated from the mainstream of cultural life.

At the heart of the difficulty in identifying the politics of middlebrow literature is its tension between individual autonomy and the pedagogical role of the middle class in the intellectual development of working- or lower-middle-class readers. Joan Shelley Rubin links the American middlebrow both to the nineteenth-century Emersonian ideal of 'self-reliance', and also to the 'genteel tradition' in late nineteenth-century American literature. The 1920s middlebrow desire for 'self-culture' – Great Books series, informational radio programs, the Book-of-the-Month Club – was simultaneously democratizing and elitist, since 'people in search of self-reliance could attain it only by becoming dependent on a superior authority outside themselves' to judge which was the best book each month, which events

belonged in the Outline of History, etc.²⁸ In Britain, working-class or lower-middle-class readers were even more prone to rely on what Jonathan Rose calls an ‘unquestioning faith in middlebrow reference works’, or on what they could find cheap in secondhand bookshops or in prepackaged series like Everyman’s Library featuring works that were in the public domain.²⁹ These were likely to be classic texts of the previous century or earlier (Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Dickens, etc.). Self-educating or grammar-school educated laborers and clerks preferred a ‘conservative canon’ of culture, and did not catch up to avant-garde modernism for decades.³⁰ The role of bourgeois teachers, publishers, and critics in this cultural formation alienated the high-brow authors whose works were not on the book-of-the-month lists. Woolf exclaims in her essay, ‘brandishing a muffin on the point of a tea spoon’ (she is having tea with a hypothetical lowbrow friend), ‘how dare the middlebrows teach *you* how to read – Shakespeare for instance? All you have to do is to read him.’³¹ Woolf’s persona here is so engaging that one cannot help but laugh, and yet the Everyman’s Library idea that everyone can learn, and should have the opportunity to do so, is ‘an engine for equality’.³² Woolf’s insistence that lowbrows have a natural ability to appreciate Shakespeare is more akin to Romantic primitivism than to 1920s progressivism. Her lowbrow tea companion remains purely hypothetical, and does not speak.

Woolf objects to another facet of middlebrow culture, its consumerism: ‘We highbrows, I agree, have to earn our livings; but when we have earned enough to live on, then we live. When the middlebrows, on the contrary, have earned enough to live on, they go on earning enough to buy.’³³ Her hostility here is more understandable – middlebrow culture was often sold as a commodity that people could acquire by owning the right books and projecting the right image.³⁴ The consumerism was also moralistic. Not only did middlebrow cultural institutions generally ignore the aesthetic experimentation of high modernist writers, they also maintained a commitment to fostering Victorian virtues in their readers. The British middlebrow novel often set itself up explicitly as the inheritor of nineteenth-century values and literary techniques and as the enemy of literary modernism: rather than showing how the center cannot hold, middlebrow novelists insisted that ‘man’s individualistic determination’ could lead to ‘readjusting the various parts and making them whole and functional again’.³⁵ Typically this reintegration of society would

be achieved through management of affect, promoting 'private life and personal feeling'.³⁶ Across the Atlantic, what Radway calls 'middlebrow personalism' used 'affect and sympathy' in order to reinforce the comforting belief that even in a mass-produced modern era, America was still filled with unique individuals.³⁷ For all these scholars, the primary agenda of the middlebrow is seen to be the shoring up of society through affective individualism; viewed in this light, middlebrow fiction is the antithesis of highbrow modernism, and Woolf's alienation from the form is easy to understand.

Whether detective fiction should be included in the category of middlebrow is slightly less clear. Detective fiction was certainly popular and bestselling, and it is entirely possible that for this reason Woolf would not have considered the works I am examining in this study to have been pernicious or bloodless, but rather would have happily discussed them over tea with her imaginary lowbrow friend. The Book-of-the-Month Club, however, which scholars of the American middlebrow use as their reference standard, has included detective fiction since its beginning.³⁸ A more expansive definition such as 'the writers the majority of people read' can explicitly include romance, detective, and children's literature.³⁹ And on the opposite end of the spectrum, detective fiction in particular was often thought of during the modernist period, as during our own, as a special case between middlebrow and highbrow.⁴⁰ But while the brow level of Christie, Sayers, and Heyer is debatable, they certainly did not '[make] of style a fetish',⁴¹ and the middlebrow is the best available context in which to set their class and gender politics. Those politics were in tension, however; predominantly conservative in class ideology, the interwar middlebrow was also recognizably feminist, and both orientations found their source in the individualism of the form: its emphasis on autonomy, self-culture, and the feelings of humans who cannot be labeled or categorized.

Scholars agree that the middlebrow novel engaged class status directly during the interwar period. American middlebrow novels were 'a kind of social pedagogy for a growing class fraction of professionals, managers, and information and culture workers'.⁴² Simultaneously, the British middlebrow novel asserted the hegemony of upper-middle-class values over the tide of lower-middle-class readers constantly rising.⁴³ This educational function was carried out primarily through the carrot rather than the stick; the pleasure of

affect and sympathy were 'a way of compensating for the structural conditions and emotional costs of a professional's life'.⁴⁴ Radway's argument here makes middlebrow novels structurally parallel to romance novels as she had analyzed them in *Reading the Romance*: each form cemented a group (middle-class professionals, women) more firmly into their repressed social positions by providing within its pages emotional compensation for discontents that might otherwise lead to radical social change. Early middlebrow novels functioned similarly to nineteenth-century conduct literature, 'educating lower-middle-class readers in the rules of haute-bourgeois discourse and behavior' and then rewarding them with a pleasurable 'sense of intimacy designed to make them feel already a part of that exclusive club to which they were assumed to aspire'.⁴⁵ As the middle classes did in the nineteenth century, the middlebrow novel also looked above itself, and 'annexe[d] aristocratic identities and values' through good-natured satire that took what it wanted and left the rest.⁴⁶

Against this vision of the middlebrow as an essentially conservative genre that played a role primarily in the area of class ideology, more recent scholars of the middlebrow have painted the genre as progressive, specifically in the area of gender ideology. Jaime Harker, for example, tries to recuperate the novels of Dorothy Canfield for what she calls the 'progressive middlebrow', arguing that Canfield should really be seen as the 'secular, modern heir of sentimental activist-writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Lydia Maria Child'.⁴⁷ The very emphasis on affect that Janice Radway, Alison Light, and earlier scholars had seen as a conservative technique is revalued by current Americanists as a positive feature;⁴⁸ indeed, Harker says as much in her later book-length study, *America the Middlebrow*, in which she accepts Radway's designation of the middlebrow novel as individualistic and emotional, but denies that it was therefore apolitical. Harker argues that the activism of the middlebrow relied on its mobilization of the same 'emotions – pity, love, patriotism, self-sacrifice, devotion' that she concedes modernist authors would have called 'sentimental'.⁴⁹ Virginia Woolf objected most strongly to middlebrow literature that was a 'mixture of geniality and sentiment stuck together with a sticky slime of calf's-foot jelly',⁵⁰ and the emotions of patriotism and self-sacrifice are sticky indeed.

While the British middlebrow was just as individualistic as the American form, it was the opposite of the American middlebrow

precisely in its rationalism and devaluation of emotion. Excessive emotion is generally presented in the novels as not only suspect but also dangerous – and this is especially true of the ‘sticky’, sentimental emotions of patriotism, self-sacrifice, and pity. In this sense, the British Female Gentleman is more closely related to high modernism than to the American progressive middlebrow – modernism is frequently labeled as detached and ironic, and the Female Gentleman novel is both of those.⁵¹ The novels I will examine are self-consciously intellectual, rationalist, and comic. They eschew sentimentality of all kinds, and characters who lack emotional self-control are always the villains or comic butts, never the protagonists. At the same time, middlebrow British fiction performed the same pedagogical role as American middlebrow novels, and both strands of the middlebrow were therefore inheritors of nineteenth-century novelistic practice.⁵² I have discussed elsewhere Dorothy Sayers’ relationship to the Victorian sensation novelist Wilkie Collins;⁵³ she shared his values while attempting to purge him of precisely the sentimentality that he, like Charles Dickens and many other Victorian novelists who desired to reform society by educating their middle-class readers, shared with Harriet Beecher Stowe. In their goals and intended audience, middlebrow novelists on both sides of the Atlantic were the inheritors of the Victorian tradition. Yet Female Gentleman novels are devoid of the sentimentalism that was part and parcel of that tradition. In this sense, the novels I examine formed a bridge between Virginia Woolf and the middlebrow that she so disliked, as an interesting liminal area not completely accounted for by any current theory.

Even the hegemony of upper-middle-class values is often self-conscious and ironic in middlebrow novels. For example, the terminology of gentlemanliness is frequently questioned even while its tenets are not. Older people in middlebrow novels use terms like ‘good form’, ‘pukka sahib’, and ‘white’ to describe people who are Our Sort both by behavior and by birth. The narrators, detectives, and younger characters of these novels often explicitly reject such verbal hallmarks of racialized snobbery. Agatha Christie, while she sometimes allows characters to use ‘white man’ as a sincere expression, also problematizes the term ‘pukka sahib’ in *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934). When Colonel Arbuthnot, a middle-aged Englishman, tries ‘rather awkwardly’ to assure the Belgian detective Poirot that the English governess Miss Debenham is ‘all right’ because she is ‘a *pukka sahib*’, the

Greek doctor wants to know what the term means. Poirot dismissively explains that 'Miss Debenham's father and brothers were at the same kind of school as Colonel Arbuthnot was', causing the doctor to comment disappointedly that 'it has nothing to do with the crime at all'. 'Exactly', says Poirot.⁵⁴ Ngaio Marsh declares in *Vintage Murder* (1937) that her detective, Alleyn, 'had never cared for' the use of 'white man' as a synonym for good person. The character who uses the phrase is an actor who thinks he is a gentleman, but whom Alleyn sees as a poseur: "'My God," thought Alleyn, "it's supposed to be Oxford, that language."⁵⁵ In *Artists in Crime* (1938), Marsh's next novel, Agatha Troy snaps 'Don't be so "pukka sahib"' at Alleyn when he is being too diffident in his romantic pursuit of her.⁵⁶ But while the narrators and characters consistently reject snobbish verbal expressions, and the narrators mark their skepticism by placing terms like 'pukka sahib' in italics or scare quotes, the heroes and heroines always conform to the actual character traits that comprised public school gentlemanliness for the older generation – that is, they always *are* pukka sahib, even if they no longer like the term itself. The skepticism expressed about class terminology, ironically, was a means of making the actual behaviors attractive to those who would not qualify to be gentlemen by birth, because it suggested that the behaviors were universally right rather than merely classy. Ultimately, the sarcastic tone served to make essential Victorian values acceptable to a generation that used 'Victorian' as a dirty word. But at the same time, that sarcasm represented an explicit rejection of the elitism that might be understood to go along with Victorian values of gentlemanliness, even if it is only a surface rejection.

The self-conscious and partially ironic annexation of gentlemanly values by the lower middle class can be seen by comparing two scenes in mystery novels by Dorothy L. Sayers. In each, her detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, offers the 'honorable' solution of suicide to a male murderer who has committed his murder through a mistaken impulse, but who is still a gentleman at heart by the moral definition of the term. Each man could save another, innocent person from harm by sacrificing himself, and each man does so after Wimsey invokes the ideals and values of gentlemanliness. But there is also a key difference. The first murderer, Walter Penberthy of *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (1928), is a member of the same upper class as Wimsey himself; the second murderer, Jim Tallboy of *Murder Must Advertise* (1933),

is not. Tallboy's lower-middle-class origins, and his sensitivity about having gone to the fictional public school Dumbleton, rather than Eton, form a significant plot point earlier in the novel. Penberthy, on the other hand, is a former Army surgeon with a Harley Street practice. When Wimsey puts it to him that he ought to kill himself, the clinching words Wimsey uses are 'In your place I know what I should do,' implying that the two operate from a shared context.⁵⁷ The entire ending reinforces the sense of shared values of honor between the generations, as Wimsey has to find Penberthy a pistol by borrowing it from an older man, Colonel Marchbanks. Both Marchbanks and Wimsey salute Penberthy as they walk away. The Colonel 'bowed gravely. Wimsey put his hand on Penberthy's shoulder for a moment, then took the Colonel's arm.'⁵⁸ The physical touch provides a sense of continuity between the three men.

When Wimsey offers Tallboy his gruesome chance at redemption at the end of the later novel, it becomes another explicit moment for the affirmation of class-based values. Tallboy says:

'I know. I've thought about that. I suppose that's –' he stopped and laughed suddenly – 'that's the public school way out of it. I – yes – all right. They'll hardly make a headline of it, though, will they? "Suicide of Old Dumbletonian" wouldn't have much news-value. Never mind, damn it! We'll show 'em that Dumbleton can achieve the Eton touch. Why not?'

'Good man!' said Wimsey. 'Have a drink. Here's luck!'⁵⁹

In this moment, Tallboy achieves the 'annexation' of class identity that Nicola Humble claims is the main purpose of the middlebrow novel. Wimsey seals the moment by shaking Tallboy's hand as he goes, as an almost ritual confirmation of the transmission of status. The remarkable parallels between these scenes make it clear that the middlebrow novel had no interest in changing the definition of what counted as moral or admirable. All it wanted to do was open the door to a wider membership in the club.

Even that much critique of class elitism had limitations. Margery Allingham's detective Albert Campion has a valet named Lugg, who is a former safe-cracker. Once he is reformed, he desires respectability and constantly harasses Campion to stay away from vulgar cases; his attempts to ape aristocratic and high-toned manners and behaviors

are a continuous source of comedy in the series. Social mobility was clearly not very likely, in Allingham's view. In *Flowers for the Judge* (1936), she presents the unappealing, cowardly, duplicitous, and overly emotional character Peter Rigget, whose parents have sent him to school and made him 'a better class than they are', but who still has all the wrong instincts. He says of himself 'I'm only educated. I haven't got any instincts. ... You can't alter your instincts. You are what you are born to be, whatever you learn.'⁶⁰ His very self-consciousness about the gap between education and instinct is modern.⁶¹ Sayers similarly draws distinctions between working-class characters based on education, and she is as skeptical of grammar-school education as Allingham. The Shakespeare-quoting rural Superintendent Kirk of *Busman's Honeymoon* is more humane than his Sergeant, because the Sergeant has 'been educated at a bad grammar-school instead of a good elementary school, and never misplaced his h's – though, as for reading good literature or quoting the poets, he couldn't do it and didn't want to'.⁶² Kirk's fondness for Shakespeare and Dickens makes him a better manager of his employees and a better detective, but his education does not allow social climbing, because he will always drop his h's, whereas Rigget is most pathetic to Campion because of his 'excellent accent'.⁶³ Like Kirk's Sergeant, Rigget is a first-generation social climber, whereas Tallboy represents the second generation. Reading detective novels that teach one the correctly ironic attitude toward middle-class values probably provided a more effective education than grammar school could.

Education and birth, however, have their limitations as well, and some forms of snobbery are unforgivable. Wimsey does not offer the option of suicide to another murderer, the highly educated, impeccably well-bred surgeon Sir Julian Freke of *Whose Body?* (1923). Out of Sayers' 11 full-length novels, only four murderers are successfully captured by the police. Gentlemanly murderers who have been discovered frequently attempt suicide in all these authors' works, and Sayers allows it about as often as any of them do. Freke, however, attempts suicide and is prevented by the police from carrying it out – an unusual outcome. This seems to me to indicate an especially harsh judgment on Sayers' part toward Freke. He has murdered the man whose wife Freke had wanted to marry in their youth, because he couldn't stand 'having his aristocratic nose put out of joint by a little Jewish nobody', as Wimsey puts it.⁶⁴ Sayers is frequently accused

of anti-Semitism, but her treatment of Freke undermines this claim. Agatha Christie occasionally succumbed to the casual racism of her era, but for the most part the other Female Gentleman novelists did not, and their works are certainly racially progressive for the 1930s.

In the area of gender, these novels' self-conscious ambiguity about elitism is even more pronounced than it is in terms of class or race. Like New Woman writers before them, Female Gentleman novelists held up a recognizably feminist vision of what an ideal woman should be, but were pessimistic about the chances of achieving it; the difference between these two generations of feminist writers is that New Woman novelists of the 1890s allowed almost no women to achieve the goal of rational, honorable living, whereas in Female Gentleman novels one character per book typically does so. When viewed as an independent genre, the feminine middlebrow novel can seem harsh, embodying a contempt for the female sex as a whole through a feminism that emphasizes 'the ability of individual women to transcend their gender, rather than represent it'.⁶⁵ While I find this assessment overly pessimistic, it is also an excellent translation of the nineteenth-century attitude toward gentlemanliness – once it is a moral category, anyone can achieve it, but it is only a distinction worth having if not everyone does. Education, whether through school or through self-chosen reading of Shakespeare or detective novels, can bring individuals (Peter Rigget, scholarship children, Jim Tallboy) out of their class, but cannot erase the class system as a whole; education and changing social conventions can do the same for individual women (Harriet Vane, Amanda Fitton, Tuppence Beresford), but not for women as a sex. This seeming pessimism is a difference from the American middlebrow, which relied on the more democratic assumption that all or most people can achieve self-culture, if they are willing to make the effort. However, it is important to remember that Female Gentleman novels did not arise in a vacuum; compared with the British New Woman novels of the previous generation of feminists, Female Gentleman novels are almost as optimistic as American middlebrow fiction.

Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night* can be, and has been, used to illustrate both the optimistic and pessimistic strands of British middlebrow writing. Academic critics who write on Sayers often do focus on this novel set in Oxford, and tend to view it as a pessimistic statement on class, gender, politics, intellectualism, war, etc.⁶⁶ I will

argue that it is in fact an optimistic novel, and that it is typical of a larger optimism among the writers I will be examining about the possibility of true reform in gender relations. The question becomes, can one have the moral qualities of gentlemanliness without the social ones, and can the term be made gender-neutral? *Gaudy Night* certainly attempts both feats, by extracting 'honor' from its medieval trappings for the modern age. The other Female Gentleman authors often made the same attempt, perhaps Agatha Christie less so (she sometimes used the phrase 'one in a thousand' to describe an admirable woman, reinforcing the rarity of the type), and Georgette Heyer more thoroughly than the rest. While they may not, in that sense, represent the majority of female middlebrow writers of their own day, they are among the best-known of those writers to today's readers, and it is important to give their more affirmative vision of gender and class identities a fuller hearing.

The politics of detective fiction

To sum up the interwar middlebrow novel, then, particularly in its British incarnation: it was individualistic; performed complex ideological work in the area of class, but particularly served as a form of education for aspiring lower-middle-class readers while correcting or discarding the upper-class values it did not like; and provided a model of female behavior that can be called feminist, but which relatively few women in the novels actually achieved. One can label this totality 'conservative' if one wishes, or one can choose to emphasize its progressive elements. The first scholars to revive middlebrow writing of the early twentieth century did the former, and more recent critics have done the latter. The same movement can be seen in literary treatments of detective fiction, which is one important subcategory of the middlebrow. Early writers almost universally declared the genre to be 'conservative', because it always begins with the disruption of an orderly society (a crime), and ends with the restoration of order when the criminal is discovered and punished. P. D. James, herself a critically acclaimed but fairly conservative mystery novelist in the same tradition as Agatha Christie, has said as recently as 2009 that the novels of the Golden Age were meant to provide a feeling of security against the social upheavals of the interwar period – 'restoring the mythical village of Mayhem Parva to prelapsarian tranquility'.⁶⁷ Some

writers have tried to complicate this judgment, either by questioning the structural argument about the genre as a whole, or by describing themes of postcolonialism, feminism, and the like in specific novels. No book to my knowledge has ever connected these two remarkably similar critical narratives, which duplicate each other's history and structure in a way that highlights how connected detective fiction and other so-called genre novels are to the middlebrow as a whole.

One might begin by protesting that it is impossible to assign a political or ideological value to a single genre, because, as Lee Horsley puts it, the final decision about whether a genre has conservative or progressive effect will be "bound up with the question of which elements in the texts critics decide to regard as the "most important"". ⁶⁸ I agree with this assessment, and will discuss the concept at more length in the Conclusion. Yet, despite Horsley's analysis in her introduction, the rest of her book does assign ideological stances to different subgenres of detective fiction, finding the earliest ones to be most conservative and the most recent ones to be the most politically activist. This same basic construction of the detective genre is at work in many recent surveys of the field, from which one gleans a remarkably consistent picture both of the genre of detective fiction, and of the history of criticism of that genre. ⁶⁹ John Scaggs, typifying this movement, classifies Golden Age novels under the chapter sub-head 'Maintaining Social Order and the Status Quo'. ⁷⁰

Foucauldian analysis has been particularly popular with scholars as a lens through which to explain the conservatism of the Golden Age detective novel. Whether Sherlock Holmes and his inheritors are seen as agents of institutional and disciplinary social organization in the wake of modern destabilization of previously solid ideologies, or Miss Marple is portrayed as a sort of living Panopticon because she sees everything in the village and solves her crimes through analysis of minute details, recent scholars have emphasized the genre's role in reproducing hegemonic discourses. On this reading, Agatha Christie's repeated motif of monstrous violence lurking just under the surface of normal village life allows the novels to underwrite a surveillance society. ⁷¹ Of course, the fact that evil always comes from within society is a good example of a genre feature that can be either emphasized or ignored to produce whatever ideological reading the critic desires, and a feminist critic could read the centrality of crime in orderly society as a condemnation

of that society. Susan Rowland goes so far as to argue that far from being a disciplinary genre, filling the ideological gap between the law and reality, detective fiction instead highlights that gap, and is inherently attuned to representing 'otherness'.⁷² But aside from Rowland, the classic detective fiction of Christie and company is almost universally regarded as the most conservative subform of the crime genre, an attempt to regain the lost order and stability of Edwardian society.

The critical narrative about detective fiction's class politics is replicated in the critical narrative about detective fiction's sexual politics. The consensus is that classic detective fiction of the interwar period was 'a particularly powerful ideological tool that consolidated and disseminated patriarchal power, and its voice was the rational, coolly logical voice of the male detective or male narrator'.⁷³ Of course, many commentators have noticed how strange it is that of the many authors writing during the classic interwar period, the half dozen whose works survive today were all women; but they tend to ascribe the success of those women writers to their essential conservatism and conventionality.⁷⁴ If the only appealing women in their novels were the 'detectives' girlfriends⁷⁵ rather than paid professional private eyes, then the public could be reassured that prewar values would be reinstated, and the idea of a woman who could balance a career with romantic bliss remained nothing more than a fantasy. But I would argue that fantasy can be just as powerful as realism. When every admirable woman in all these novels presents the same idealized features, over and over, inevitably the message finally sinks in that perhaps they should not be a fantasy.⁷⁶ Practicing mystery novelist and literary academic Carolyn Heilbrun ('Amanda Cross') declared as early as 1986 in a conference keynote that the androgyny of Golden Age British novel characters allowed their authors 'to dabble in a little profound revolutionary thought'.⁷⁷ This view of middlebrow feminism is more compelling, and more usable for today's young woman reader.

Another aspect in which criticism of the detective genre parallels that of middlebrow fiction as a whole is in the area of reader participation. Just as Nicola Humble argues that the middlebrow novel works by making the reader feel part of an exclusive club, many scholars of the Golden Age mystery note the way that it draws the reader in as a participant. The famous rules of 'fair play' created by

the Detection Club in the 1920s assumed that there was a definite relationship between the reader and the author. The relationship can be seen as a kind of collusion between author and reader,⁷⁸ but has been more often interpreted as adversarial, with the 'fair play' rules designed to prevent the author from cheating the reader.⁷⁹ In a similar debate, the reader's insertion into an active role in the text can be interpreted as an aspect of the genre's conservative ideological function.⁸⁰ Others see the reader's invitation to participate as a feature that 'democratizes the form'.⁸¹ I will argue in Chapter 3 that the key technique that creates the sense of readerly inclusion in the novels is the narrators' and characters' use of irony, and that therefore the ideological work of the novels cannot be simply democratic or disciplinary.

Middlebrow feminism, then and now

The term I have been using, 'Female Gentleman', evokes an entire complex of feminist debate. It seems, at first glance, that the women who embody this paradigm are getting ahead by acting like a man. Why should the detective's girlfriend adopt his coolly logical male voice, rather than solving crimes through her intuition *f eminine* (a tactic explicitly rejected by many of the characters I would give this label)? The rationalism and emotional self-control central to the Female Gentleman's conception of honor are traits that have been gendered masculine in essentialist thinking since the seventeenth century, if not longer. But there has always been an accompanying strand of feminist theory that has resisted that equation. Mary Wollstonecraft, a thoroughly rationalist thinker of the Enlightenment, spent much of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) arguing that reason is the fundamental distinguishing trait of the human species, and not of a particular sex. At the same time, the feminized men and masculinized women that Carolyn Heilbrun found revolutionary in classic detective fiction are androgynous in the same way that Virginia Woolf idealized in *A Room of One's Own*. Dorothy L. Sayers acknowledged that there were fundamental differences between men and women, but argued that these differences were no more important than age, nationality, or any other category; she believed that 'All categories, if they are insisted upon beyond the immediate purpose which

they serve, breed class antagonism and disruption in the state, and that is why they are dangerous.⁸² Sayers insisted that all people must be treated as individuals.⁸³ Crystal Downing notes that this sort of feminism that refuses to name itself as such was very common among professional women of this period, who were apt to say 'We're interested in people now – not men and women.'⁸⁴ Sayers has been faulted by some feminist critics for precisely this attitude. But I would argue that Sayers was exactly as much a feminist as Wollstonecraft. Their identification of rationality as human, not male, is a feminist act.

The heart of *Female Gentlemanhood* was rationality (control of emotions), which makes women equally human with men. In this sense, the feminism of the *Female Gentleman* was fundamentally different from that of her immediate literary predecessor, the *New Woman*, who sought to employ an essentialist definition of women as morally superior to bring men up to the level of humanity enjoyed by women, as I will argue in Chapter 2. Feminist theorists, despite their philosophical rejection of essentialism, frequently engage in practical literary criticism as if they also believe in that fundamental female superiority. They condemn the rationality of modernism because they seek 'a Romantic ideal of femininity as an enclave of natural self-presence', but the very 'nostalgia for such a non-alienated plenitude is itself a product of modern dualistic schemas which positioned woman as an ineffable Other'.⁸⁵ Undoubtedly many male writers of the modernist period also positioned women as Other in the same way. But what should interest us most is the way that women have responded to and subverted that positioning. In essence, the model of the *Female Gentleman* was an adaptation of the nineteenth-century concept of gentlemanliness that rejected the 'dualistic schema' underlying the original concept, without rejecting any of its content.

The historical position of the *Female Gentleman* novels in the development of feminism helps account for the discounting of their contributions to women's advancement. The period I am examining falls squarely within one of the troughs between the major waves of feminism. That is, 'first wave' feminism ended with the gaining of full women's suffrage (1920 in America, 1928 in Britain), and 'second wave' feminism began in the 1960s with women's liberation. The 1930s have frequently been seen as 'a slough of feminine despond',⁸⁶

and the 1950s as an even deeper doldrum. This view distorts the picture considerably, by focusing only on legislation rather than culture; in fact, it even glosses over the complexity of legislative history. While it is common to consolidate the entire period before 1920 into a single 'first wave', in fact there were periods of legislative activism and subsequent contraction prior to 1900; for example, the successes in the reform of marriage laws in the mid-nineteenth century were succeeded by a period when women made fewer political gains and more economic ones, in the 1890s. The 1890s produced New Woman novels, which are often accorded the same ambivalent treatment by literary critics as Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers receive. I will begin my study, then, with an exploration of the nineteenth-century contexts of Female Gentleman novels: the failed gentlemen of Victorian authors like Charlotte Brontë and Wilkie Collins, and the New Women of the 1890s. In Chapter 2 I argue that Female Gentleman novels envisioned exactly the same ideal lives for their protagonists and minor female characters that Victorian writers did, but that, unlike Victorian and New Woman authors, middlebrow writers provided optimistic endings for the few women who were rational and controlled. Female Gentlemen generally achieved their goals, whereas New Women, possessing the same character traits, almost never did. This increasing optimism is an essential indicator of the progress made by women between 1890 and 1930. After a detailed discussion of the traits of the Female Gentleman and their manifestation in specific novels in Chapter 3, I return in the Conclusion to the question of the overall value of this character for today's readers.

Just as was true for the cigarette-smoking, bicycle-riding typists of the 1890s, or the Oxford-educated women writing ad copy in the 1930s, women in North America and Europe today are close to social and economic equality without any longer having a single legislative agenda to focus and unify the movement. 'Third wave' feminisms have not provided such a unifying focus, and because of their emphasis on multiculturalism and globalization, it seems almost inevitable that feminism is once again a kind of individualism. It is easy to dismiss Dorothy Sayers and her contemporaries as nothing more than premature postfeminists – or to acclaim them as ahead of their time for the same reason. Jaime Harker attempts to recuperate the middlebrow writer Dorothy Canfield as a progressive by making

her the intellectual inheritor of Harriet Beecher Stowe, an essentialist who relied on the moral authority of women's differences; I might argue that Sayers is more akin to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who passionately argued the same libertarian, rationalist individualism as John Stuart Mill. Would any of these nineteenth-century authors be considered a 'real feminist' today? The question is rhetorical, of course, but the comparison is worth bearing in mind as we revisit the nineteenth century in Chapter 2.

2

Victorian Contexts: Failed Gentlemen and New Women

The roots of the Female Gentleman stretch back at least as far as Mary Wollstonecraft and the feminist theorists who followed her in criticizing the idea that men and women were essentially different beings, to be held to different standards. The most important precursor of the Female Gentleman, to which writers of the 1920s and 1930s were responding most directly, was the New Woman of the 1890s. The ideals lived by the protagonists of Female Gentleman novels are very similar to those of New Women, but the later characters were allowed by their authors to be more successful than the earlier ones ever were. In that sense, the 1920s saw the first period in which the theoretical ideals of feminism had an optimistic manifestation in literature, rather than leading only to suicide, madness, or disillusioned retreat. This contrast goes a long way toward explaining why Female Gentleman novels are still popular today, when New Woman novels are forgotten by all but specialist scholars; but it also cuts against the grain of most New Woman criticism, which tends to paint New Woman novels as the direct precursor of the Women's Liberation fiction of 'second wave' feminism, and which gives short shrift to the decades between. In fact, although the period from 1930 to 1960 might have been a 'trough' between waves of feminism in social and political history, the novels I am examining are ironically more successful at advocating certain feminist ideals. Their absence from histories of feminist fiction distorts the picture, especially because Female Gentleman novels are still read by current generations.

Before examining the New Woman novels in detail, it is necessary to establish the background. In *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

(1792), Mary Wollstonecraft had provided the first systematic theoretical explication of what we would now call anti-essentialism, arguing that men and women are more alike than different. As an Enlightenment rationalist, 'reason' and 'rational' are her primary terms of praise, and indeed she claims that 'improveable reason is ... the dignified distinction which raises men above the brute creation'.¹ Correct use of reason is the only path to virtue for Wollstonecraft, and she argues that if conduct manuals do not appeal to women as 'rational creatures' and instead treat them 'rather as women than human creatures', they will never succeed in reaching them.² She is quite consistent throughout in emphasizing the essential similarity between the sexes ('human'), and downplaying the differences ('man' vs 'woman'). Her main argument is founded on religious premises as well as rationalism: 'I see not the shadow of a reason to conclude that their virtues should differ in respect to their nature. In fact, how could they, if virtue has only one eternal standard? I must therefore, if I reason consequentially, as strenuously maintain that they have the same simple direction, as that there is a God.'³ Wollstonecraft would surely not have found it strange to see women a century and a half later living out the same code of gentlemanliness as their brothers, and indeed her combination of rationalism and religion is echoed by Dorothy Sayers in her essay 'The Human-Not-Quite-Human'. Wollstonecraft's rationalist and individualist vision of women's rights was taken up by many mid-nineteenth-century thinkers, perhaps most prominently John Stuart Mill, in the definitive philosophical exposition of anti-essentialist theory, *The Subjection of Women* (1868). Other voices making similar arguments at mid-century included American suffragists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and to a lesser extent British suffragists like Frances Power Cobbe and Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon.

Despite the number of voices providing reasoned refutations of essentialist theory, it remained firmly entrenched in popular Victorian thinking about sex roles; as Mary Poovey puts it, 'The model of a binary opposition between the sexes ... underwrote an entire system of institutional practices and conventions.'⁴ Womanliness and manliness were inherently different, and their virtues and vices were different as well. Very few authors depicted characters who even tried to live up to Wollstonecraft's theory that men's and women's virtues should be the same. Sexual morality provided a justification

for restrictions on women in every area of life; 'The contradiction between a sexless, moralized angel and an aggressive, carnal magdalen' was one of the 'constitutive characteristics' of domestic ideology because it provided 'a defensible explanation of inequality' and levers of control on women.⁵ Erasing this fundamental difference and ensuring that sexual morality for men and women would have the same definition was a key focus of New Woman energy.

Virginia Woolf gives a more famous and popularly accessible description of the moralized angel, contemporary with the *Female Gentleman* novels I will be examining:

You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her – you may not know what I mean by the Angel in the House. I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it – in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty – her blushes, her great grace. In those days – the last of Queen Victoria – every house had its Angel.⁶

Woolf was addressing young career women in this essay, 'Professions for Women' (1931), and her description may be fairly said to sum up the attitude of progressive women of that day toward the Angel. Her satirical tone recalls the similarly pitiless judgment rendered by Katherine Mansfield's 'The Daughters of the Late Colonel' (1922). This story is humorous on the surface, presenting two protagonists, Josephine and Constantia, who are devoid of any mind or wish of their own. Their wavering seems merely comical when the reader assumes them to be teenagers. As the story continues and one pieces together clues, one realizes that they are in fact middle-aged women – surviving Victorians – whose father had kept them so sheltered that they are unable to function in the world once he has died. My sophomore-level literature students are invariably shocked and appalled when I piece together the clues and do the math for them. The judgment on Victorian gender roles that moment of shock renders is as powerful

as the more comical violence of Woolf's climax in 'Professions for Women', when she kills the Angel by throwing an inkpot at her.

Although Woolf was surely exaggerating in assuming young women of 1931 had never heard of the Angel in the House, New Woman novelists had succeeded so far in their goals in those last days of Queen Victoria that, 30 years later, an audience of women just the age to become bestselling authors would need historical orientation by an older woman to understand her struggles with 'purity' at the beginning of her career. Virginia Woolf was born in 1882, Katherine Mansfield in 1888, Agatha Christie in 1890, Dorothy L. Sayers in 1893, Ngaio Marsh in 1895, Georgette Heyer in 1902, and Margery Allingham in 1904. Woolf was, by dates, close to being a New Woman herself, and the fact that she is not considered one is well explained by Ann Ardis' thesis in *New Women, New Novels*, that modernism had to make New Woman fiction its Other in order to cement its claim to originality in using literary techniques New Women pioneered.⁷ The decade or two that separated Woolf from my authors was just enough to provide a generational shift reflected in the movement from New Woman ideas to those of the Female Gentleman. It seems unlikely that Christie or Sayers, born in the nineteenth century, would have needed any guidance from Woolf to have understood the Angel, but the character Harriet Vane seems, from internal evidence in the novels, to have been born around 1900, and, like the other authors and most of their characters, would be part of the new generation to whom Woolf was speaking. That generation, not having been forced to be Angels, viewed the questions of sex and economics differently than their New Woman predecessors.

Failed gentlemen

Female Gentleman novels depict other women metaphorically imitating Woolf's throwing of the inkpot. But during the long dominance of the Angel in the nineteenth century, very few women tried to kill the Angel, and none succeeded. Indeed, there were some female prototypes of the classic detective produced in the nineteenth century, beginning with the heroines of novels by anonymous mid-Victorian authors who solved crimes as agents of the police; Stephen Knight describes one of these, Mrs Paschal, as solving her crimes by being 'skilled, sensible, and brave',⁸ much like the intrepid 1920s

version of the Female Gentleman I will describe in Chapter 3. Female detectives appeared off and on, including the most famous, Lady Molly of Scotland Yard (a late entry from 1910). But female detectives in the nineteenth century were exceptional characters and not at all realistic, as Scotland Yard had no actual female detectives until the twentieth century.⁹ The Female Gentlemen I will examine are sometimes detectives, but far more often they are not, and the significance of the trope for me is that it extends to all characters, not merely to detectives, who are always exceptional figures even in today's mystery novels. Therefore the proper historical context for the Female Gentleman is not proto-detective fiction, but fiction in general. Where and when did realistic female characters attempt to be gentlemen, and how well did they succeed?

We can begin where Virginia Woolf does, with Charlotte Brontë. In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf depicts Brontë as the first woman author who was consciously angry over her treatment by society; she identifies Brontë's 'indignation' over the plight of women under the law of difference as the defect that prevents her from ever getting 'her genius expressed whole and entire', leading to books that are 'deformed and twisted'.¹⁰ While one might disagree with Woolf's assessment of whether *Jane Eyre* (1847) is a flawed novel, it seems clear that Jane Eyre herself is the first fictional woman who tries to be a gentleman rather than a lady. She is famous for having expressed women's discontent with their lot in life strongly enough to have been disapproved for it by Victorian critics as an instigator of 'hunger, rebellion, and rage' (Matthew Arnold), or 'Chartism and rebellion' (Elizabeth Rigby). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar begin their chapter on *Jane Eyre* in *The Madwoman in the Attic* by quoting these and several other Victorian reviews.¹¹ They themselves refer back to Jane as 'Byronically feminist' in the first chapter of *No Man's Land*, Volume 1.¹²

But while Jane Eyre is a strong personality and eventually wins her way to a happy ending by taking radical action to guard her own self-worth, the pattern by which she does so conforms to the most basic philosophical tenets of domestic ideology. She exhibits passive and essentially feminine virtues. Her major act of heroism is to run away from Rochester's bigamous proposal, and to endure near starvation on the moors rather than lose her sense of self. This defense of herself equates her 'honor' with her sexual chastity, in

a very traditional manner that I will discuss at greater length in Chapter 3; Jane's actions here are quite conventional, even if they are not strictly realistic. Her decision not to marry St John Rivers requires her to be even stronger in some ways, since resisting a charismatic personality is harder than running away. But she does it on essentially womanly grounds again. Rivers wants her to marry him so he can have a partner for his missionary work; he portrays the marriage to Jane as a higher good which is her duty. She refuses on the grounds that marriage should always be for love and personal fulfillment, not just for work. She frames this as another means of preserving her individual self, and even as a matter of principle: that marriage is a particular state with its own requirements, and to enter into it purely for pragmatic reasons would be wrong. Yet this principle is the principle of personal feeling itself. She rejects marriage to St John because when she imagines it, she sees him slowly killing her: 'but as his wife – at his side always, and always restrained, and always checked – forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry, though the imprisoned flame consumed vital after vital – *this* would be unendurable'.¹³ Jane is undoubtedly correct that marriage with St John would be torture, and she is perfectly right to refuse it, but doing so is not a matter of principle, but of her personal feelings. Placing principles above individual feelings was to be one of the key tenets of honor for New Women and Female Gentlemen, and Jane Eyre does not do it.

Gilbert and Gubar admit the imperfection of Jane's rebellion in *Madwoman in the Attic*, arguing that Brontë 'was unable clearly to envision viable solutions to the problem of patriarchal oppression', and that for this reason she ensconces Jane and Rochester at Ferndean, a place completely withdrawn from the real world. The time was not yet right for a real-world Jane Eyre, they argue, because 'no one of her contemporaries, not even a Wollstonecraft or a Mill, could adequately describe a society so drastically altered that the matured Jane and Rochester could really live in it'.¹⁴ Their argument here anticipates the common pattern of New Woman novels that I will discuss below, in which rebellious female protagonists can never achieve happiness in the real world, and come to bad ends except when their authors occasionally relent and allow them to live in alternative utopias.

Brontë wrote another novel that seems on the surface to be a better candidate for the Female Gentleman label, *Shirley* (1849). Its titular heroine bears a strong resemblance to a number of Georgette Heyer's characters, such as Antonia Vereker and the perhaps significantly named Shirley Brown – like Shirley Keeldar, these later women deal capably with horses and dogs, and adopt certain masculine surface behaviors. Brontë's Shirley teasingly says in one of her first scenes 'They gave me a man's name; I hold a man's position: it is enough to inspire me with a touch of manhood'; a little later, her former governess and companion takes her to task for whistling and adopting 'masculine manners' in speech.¹⁵ Shirley famously questions the Miltonic vision of women as inherently different from and inferior to men, first in a speech to Caroline Helstone rejecting 'Milton's Eve' as a portrait of his cook, not of the 'woman-Titan' who was 'Jehovah's daughter, as Adam was his son'.¹⁶ Later, Shirley's vision of this female Titan is elaborated in her essay 'La Première Femme Savante', written as an exercise for her French tutor, Louis Moore. In this essay, Shirley envisions Eve as the spirit of all humanity, mating with the divine force of Genius, who is a seraph rather than a mortal man.¹⁷ But Brontë denies Shirley her utopian vision more violently than she does Jane Eyre. When Shirley writes about the seraph Genius, it is clear that Louis Moore himself is meant to be the hero of the essay. He 'masters' her as more than her tutor. He counters her essay on *The First Learned Woman* by requiring her to recite 'Le Cheval Dompté' (The Tamed Horse). Shirley desires his taming, provoking him into proposing to her forcefully – that is, holding her by the arm and refusing to let her leave the room until she gives him an answer.¹⁸ Their relationship is even more overtly founded on power and domination than Jane's with Rochester, and the words 'tame', 'taming', and 'tameless' form a frequent motif. Her submission to him in this happy ending is a jarring change from her earlier independence. She has to force him to be the master, because she is rich and he is poor, and he would never gain respect from their social peers if he did not act as if he had a right to her riches. Of course, the allure of the masterful educator was a theme in all Brontë's novels, but it is nevertheless wrenching to see the possibility of partnership evaporate so thoroughly in the final chapters. The ideal of comradely marriage, so frequently achieved in Female Gentleman novels, was still below the horizon in 1849.

Another promising but ultimately unrealized potential Victorian Female Gentleman is the heroine of Wilkie Collins' sensational *The Moonstone* (1868), which is frequently called the first British detective novel. Rachel Verinder is described by more than one of the characters of this multi-narrator novel in terms that make her resemble nothing so much as a character from *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. Gabriel Betteredge, the first narrator, introduces her as a 'stiff-necked' girl who 'judged for herself, as few women of twice her age judge in general'.¹⁹ This independence leads to extreme behaviors of secrecy and loyalty, which map onto the traits of honor I will discuss in Chapter 3. She refuses to tell what she knows about Franklin Blake's involvement in the theft of her diamond for the same reason that 'telling tales' on one's classmates was a cardinal sin for Tom Brown. Tom's refusal to 'peach' after being 'roasted' at the hearth is the linchpin event in breaking Flashman's bullying regime, because it gains him the respect of the older boys and loses some for Flashman.²⁰ Rachel similarly suffers rather than 'peach' on her friends. Earlier in the novel, Betteredge had said:

With all her secrecy, and self-will, there was not so much as the shadow of anything false in her. I never remember her breaking her word; I never remember her saying No, and meaning Yes. I can call to mind, in her childhood, more than one occasion when the good little soul took the blame, and suffered the punishment, for some fault committed by a playfellow whom she loved. Nobody ever knew her to confess to it, when the thing was found out, and she was charged with it afterwards. But nobody ever knew her to lie about it, either.²¹

Rachel holds true to this definition of honor by protecting Franklin Blake when she believes he is guilty of stealing her diamond, suffering for him as she suffered for her friends, but never telling a lie in the process, merely refusing to speak at all. Like Tom Brown allowing his legs to be burned rather than cry out or tell tales, Rachel's honor is found in silence.

As is the case in many Female Gentleman novels, Rachel's honor is portrayed as exceptional among women. The lawyer with whom she stays after her mother's death, and who loves her sincerely, says jovially that 'women, as you may have observed, have no principles'

when he explains to Blake why his wife and daughters did not share his own hesitation in turning his house into a trap to force Rachel to speak to Blake.²² Like Shirley Keeldar, Rachel distinguishes herself from other women by her way of speaking; Miss Clack comments that she addresses Godfrey Ablewhite 'in the off-hand manner of one young man talking to another'.²³ Later, when Godfrey comes to propose to her, they begin their scene with a discussion of venue:

'Why have you come up here, Godfrey?' she asked. 'Why didn't you go into the library?'

He laughed softly, and answered, 'Miss Clack is in the library.'

'Clack in the library!' She instantly seated herself on the ottoman in the back drawing-room. 'You are quite right, Godfrey. We had much better stop here.'²⁴

Her manner here resembles the ironically bantering tone that many Female Gentlemen later adopt when speaking to other young people, which I will discuss in Chapter 3. Rachel both refers to and addresses her cousin as Clack, the way boys and young men talked to each other at school or college. Although it was common by the early twentieth century for girls who went to equivalent schools and colleges to address each other by surname in the same manner, that was not the case in the 1860s.

But although Rachel is more like a young Victorian gentleman than a young Victorian lady, she fails in the former role in two ways. The first is that her refusal to expose Franklin is emotional rather than principled. When Franklin finally forces his way into her presence and extracts from her a plain statement of what she saw him do that night, she castigates herself and him with 'hysterical passion', despising her own 'shameful weakness' in still loving him. The word 'frantic' is used twice on one page describing her emotions in this scene, which ends with Blake in tears as well.²⁵ While most Female Gentleman novels allow their heroines to feel passionately for men, the ideal is to place an honor of the mind or of principle above that of personal feeling, and Rachel fails to do this, although she admits that she ought to. Tom Brown refuses to tell tales on an older boy who bullies him purely because of the principle of not 'peaching', rather than because he likes Flashman; Rachel protects only the 'playfellows' whom she loves. Rachel's second failure of gentlemanliness is her

passivity; she is not the protagonist of the novel, despite holding the key to the mystery, and her honor is entirely one of silence and endurance. Betteredge had begun the novel by saying that she was 'stiff-necked' and willing to defy fashion, but we rarely see her make active choices in judgment. She is not a narrator of the book, even though every other major character rotates through that position. In the famously complex narrative structure Collins employs, Rachel occupies the same subject position as the stolen diamond itself, mystified into allegorical significance. Her lack of her own voice is the most fundamental difference between Rachel and the various point-of-view characters in *New Woman* and *Female Gentleman* novels.

New Women in theory

Jane Eyre, Shirley Keeldar, and Rachel Verinder all behave more as gentlemen than as ladies, but each achieves only partial success. Feminist scholars have tried to add a few of George Eliot's heroines to this list: Elaine Showalter, for example, devotes a chapter to George Eliot as the intellectual progenitor of *New Woman* feminism in *Sexual Anarchy*, while Sally Ledger discusses some attempts to read Dorothea Brooke and Gwendolen Harleth as 'embryonic *New Women*'.²⁶ These women are also only partial gentlemen at best, not even as successful as Rachel Verinder. Only with *New Woman* novels did Wollstonecraft's call for men and women to practice the same kind of virtue as each other find any fulfillment. However, *New Woman* novels generally did not envision the possibility that women (or men) could be successful in this practice. They are analyses of how social conventions shape individuals so powerfully that they cannot break free, and they tend to show heroines whose attempts to live their feminist principles end in defeat – whether that defeat be death, madness, or retreat to conformity. W. T. Stead's review of *The Woman Who Did* (1895) called it a 'boomerang of a book'.²⁷ Ann Ardis uses the term 'boomerang book' repeatedly in her landmark study *New Women, New Novels* to describe the common plot pattern of *New Woman* novels – they allow women to go far out in the middle of the book, but pull them back sharply in the end, whether through death or through capitulation to conventional roles. The consistency of this plot pattern has led many scholars of the form to see it as one of 'weary disillusion' for a 'tragic generation'.²⁸

Female Gentleman novels of the 1930s, by contrast, are generally optimistic. While some of this may be attributed to their desire to sell well, that is not adequate explanation by itself. The New Woman novels of the 1890s were also bestsellers, regardless of their heroines' unhappy fates. The formulas of genre fiction were not as entrenched in the publishing world in the 1930s as they are now, and they do not dictate that there must be happy endings for all characters, or even most; in the detective fiction, the murder has to be solved, but the survivors are not required to get married and live happily ever after. They frequently do so, especially in the works of Georgette Heyer and Ngaio Marsh, but other authors were far more likely to leave their characters scarred and unhappy at the end. Agatha Christie, in particular, favored a high body count or overall tragic results. So the difference in this regard is important, signaling a real change between 1890 and 1930. Perhaps the best explanation of New Woman Novels is Sally Ledger's contention that they operate as a Foucauldian 'reverse discourse': the other that is automatically called into existence when a culture creates a repressive dominant discourse, ironically providing a label by which the suppressed behavior can name itself and build its identity. The 'New Woman' label was created by anti-feminists to vilify feminism, but became a rallying cry. Reverse discourses, however, can only undermine dominant discourses rather than build new structures, explaining the New Woman novel's 'inability to think beyond heterosexual marriage as the only available route to happiness and fulfillment for women'.²⁹ The oppressive sameness of New Woman novels' dreary endings arose from the same force that allowed Female Gentleman novels to be optimistic. After the reverse discourse of marriage reform had operated for 30 years, it was entrenched, just like the social freedoms of smoking and bicycling and unchaperoned movement about the city. Female Gentlemen, therefore, became free to build rather than subvert.

Most writers on the New Woman have portrayed the fiction of the 1890s as being the first conscious feminist fiction, and have devalued work of the immediate post-New Woman era in favor of drawing connections to the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, or to the third-wave feminism of the 1990s.³⁰ Such comparisons privilege the ends of centuries and gloss over the period in between. But that intermediate period is a fruitful source of ideas with which

to confront the challenges that arise at the beginning of a century rather than at its end. The 1930s, when Female Gentleman authors began or consolidated their careers, were a transitional decade, away from an older generation's vision of feminism and toward another – as is our own 'postfeminist' time. Just as my students are prone to say 'I'm not a feminist, but ...' because they never marched for equal rights or reproductive freedom themselves, the women who were girls while their mothers were marching in protests for the vote had a very different style than those suffragists, and often disliked suffragist rhetoric; this was particularly true of Dorothy L. Sayers.³¹ Women who began their careers in the 1920s or 1930s might have overlapped with older New Women, but clearly saw themselves as different. Their depictions of New Woman issues, particularly sexual ones, are often gently satiric, even as they quietly uphold some of the same rights of personal freedom. The Female Gentleman existed during the trough between 'waves' of feminism, but was neither the antagonist nor the direct successor of the New Woman. Young women of the 1930s revised their mothers' ideals, but in a direction we have since abandoned. The ascent of 'difference feminism' and the third-wave feminist focus on the intersection of race and gender have combined to make the Female Gentleman seem like an evolutionary dead end of feminism. One purpose of my study is to re-examine their road not taken, and ask what current feminism can salvage from it. During the rising tide of fascism in the 1930s (which Sayers, Christie, and Marsh explicitly denounced), an emphasis on individual choice and perfect honor in personal relations was a form of resistance; our era needs the ideal of honor as a corrective in the same way.

Because the Female Gentleman so directly revises her New Woman forerunner, it is necessary to understand the fiction of this period in some detail before examining the novels at the heart of my study. New Women of the 1890s, both in reality and in the popular image that grew rapidly in the press, were associated with three main rebellions or goals. First, New Women were popularly associated with many trivial contraventions of custom, such as smoking in public, riding bicycles, and wearing divided skirts and other masculinely tailored 'rational dress'. These seemingly trivial things, of course, could potentially lead to wider reforms; for example, bicycles represent mobility and physical freedom from restraint, the ability to leave the family home without needing to have servants come along to drive

the horses. Second, New Women sought higher education and the paying careers outside the home that followed from such education. Girton Girls and Typewriter Girls delineate the two class-bound ends of this spectrum. Finally, New Women desired to talk openly about and change the rules regarding sexual relations. This third feature was the most controversial in the 1890s. New Women, however, were definitively not associated with formal movements to gain legal or political rights, but rather with agitation in more personal, individualistic realms.³² The personal is political, however, as we know, and Elaine Showalter argues that the New Woman idea 'that sexuality and sex roles might no longer be confined within the neat and permanent borderlines of gender categories' symbolically threatened the entire Victorian social system of hierarchies in race, class, nationality, and culture as well.³³ Thus the sexuality of New Woman fiction has been the focus of most modern scholars, as it was of contemporary critics. In the early decades of the twentieth century, suffragism as an organized movement eclipsed the more individualistic New Woman trend. Only after suffrage was achieved did the focus of young women come back, in the 1930s, to the same questions of personal choices and sexual ethics that their New Woman mothers and aunts had addressed.

New Women in fact and fiction: social conventions

The most iconic images of New Women center on the small personal areas of rebellion against social conventions. Such items as bicycles, cigarettes, divided skirts, and latchkeys were easy to turn into memorable iconography. The notorious *Punch* cartoon of 1894, 'Donna Quixote', encapsulated and popularized this image. The cartoon shows a woman wearing masculine-tailored, dark clothing with a partially divided skirt, glasses, and a severe hairdo, holding aloft a latchkey and reading books by Ibsen, Tolstoy, and the New Woman novelist Mona Caird. The accompanying text satirizes her loathing of marriage and warns her not to resist 'Nature's Plan'.³⁴ Even in this cartoon, then, it is clear that the social and legal ramifications of women's desire to wear rational dress – in this case, potential changes to marriage laws – were more important to critics of the day than the conventions themselves. The visible minor rebellions, however, evoked strong emotional reactions in the older generation.

Eliza Lynn Linton, one of the most prominent anti-New Woman writers, reveals how common New Woman behaviors and the fears they aroused had become in a passage about smoking. Linton deplores the fact that ‘after dinner, our young married women and husbandless girls ... “light up” with the men’. She tries to persuade them to refrain by claiming that smoking makes them look just like the ‘pitbrow women’ of the North, who are justified in ‘tak[ing] to the habits of men’ because they are ‘ancient dames, with “whiskin” beards about their “mou’s,” withered and unsightly, worn out, and no longer women in desirableness or beauty’.³⁵ The savagery of this rhetoric, arguing that women who smoke are both unsexed and unclassed, could only be effective if most of the women who smoked were not hardened activists, but average girls following a fad. The passage exposes Linton’s own anxieties effectively, and reveals a great deal about the underlying political dynamics of the New Woman era. Smoking, bicycles, and latchkeys were not inherently important, but were feared as the precursors of something worse. The ‘worse’ was women with education and careers (working just like the pitbrow women), but the ‘worst’ would be women who no longer cared to follow sexual rules – who would, literally, be ‘no longer women’.

With that in mind, it is worth noting that though New Women may not have been successful in abolishing marriage, and most were not even really trying to do so, they did largely succeed in these smaller areas. The more symbolic features of New Womanhood had become unremarkable facets of everyday life by the 1930s, and Female Gentleman novels reflect this, even occasionally satirizing the old folks who still shudder at women who smoke or drink cocktails. Most characters of both genders in all these novels smoke like chimneys – except for Mrs Goodacre, the vicar’s wife in *Busman’s Honeymoon* (1937), ‘because of the parish’, even though it’s ‘very absurd’.³⁶ This novel also contains what seems like deliberate tweaking of the issue of rational dress, as the narrator takes the opportunity, on the morning after the Wimseys’ wedding night, to describe how much simpler Harriet’s clothing is than Peter’s, and therefore how much less time it takes her to dress: ‘In nothing has the whirligig of time so redressed the balance between the sexes as in this business of getting up in the morning. ... Harriet was knotting her tie before the sound of splashing was heard in the next room.’³⁷ Harriet’s mannish tie and her lack of makeup are treated as a positive

by the narrator, but also as nothing very important – the reference to the balance between the sexes seems like a deliberate invocation of larger politics which the narrator then pointedly fails to take up. The young women in Georgette Heyer's mysteries usually go even further in aping certain male manners in an exaggerated way that undoubtedly satirizes New Women: Sally Drew in *A Blunt Instrument* (1938) sports a monocle, Antonia Vereker in *Death in the Stocks* (1935) breeds bull-terriers and curses like her brother, Dinah Fawcett of *The Unfinished Clue* (1934) favors 'severely tailored' clothing.³⁸ But the narrators treat these outward mannerisms as superficialities. In Ngaio Marsh's novels, people just wear what they wear, and say what they say, and no one thinks anything more of it – the best possible index of progress.

One pervasive area in which both New Woman and Female Gentleman novels illustrate the changes in women's personal freedom is their depictions of women in motion, particularly in the city of London. A key trope of both modernism and of 1890s decadence was the figuring of the male artist as the '*flâneur*', or stroller, who walks freely about the city observing it without interacting with it.³⁹ Feminist scholars have debated whether there could, in the nineteenth century, have been a *flâneuse*, and whether this trope is ultimately empowering or disempowering for women. In summarizing this debate, Sally Ledger concludes that the answer is mixed; the 1890s was the decade in which the possibility of women having enough freedom of movement to embody that role first emerged, but it was by no means yet certain in that decade that a woman moving about the streets unescorted would not be taken for a prostitute. Only in certain spaces – department stores, teashops, public transportation, and so on – were women safe alone, but even these few spaces represent a drastic increase from previous decades. Ledger uses Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) to illustrate the mixed results of women's interactions with city space: Monica Madden acts as a *flâneuse* on her Sundays off, enabled by the tube, but that very freedom leads to her marriage to her repressive husband, who chokes off her urban freedom of mobility.⁴⁰ Mona Caird provides a much more idyllic passage of urban freedom in *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894), in the chapters in which the protagonist Hadria Fullerton flees to Paris. Her journey on the English train, boat, and French train are all presented in impressionist prose of the type most associated with the 'lush' and 'decadent'

New Woman styles, and her first weeks in Paris are described as what Patricia Murphy calls 'an entry into a green world'.⁴¹ Hadria wanders alone in the streets, loiters in parks, and enjoys the sense that she has no calls on her time. Of course, she has to leave Paris eventually and is reinserted firmly into the circumscribed village world she had fled – and a cynical reader such as myself might note that it is only possible for her to wander freely in Paris because she has a servant to care for the child she has adopted and brought with her.

By the 1920s, women's freedom of movement within the city was established and unquestioned. One of the most iconic scenes of the success of feminism – its assimilation into the stream of modern life – is Elizabeth Dalloway's trip to the City on an omnibus in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925); her mother's walk around Mayfair and Hyde Park in the opening sequence of the novel is a similar, but less impressive moment. The heroines of Female Gentleman novels, from the same period, are absolutely at home in public spaces. Georgette Heyer's mystery novels feature heroines who wander alone, sometimes with large dogs and sometimes without, and her Regency romances often lament the proper young lady's inability to do the same thing in the city (as they could in the country) as an indication of the stifling social conventions of the period. Dorothy Sayers depicts working women walking the streets of London, taking the bus or tube, driving their own cars. *Strong Poison* (1930) features a long comical sequence in which Miss Climpson has tea, alone, in every teashop in a small town, in order to track down a nurse she is investigating. It also contains a scene in which the typist Miss Murchison loiters in a London street looking in shop windows, to provide a pretext to go back into her place of work after hours and break into a safe; during this scene she encounters her supervisor on the street, and routs him with a comment that turns on its head the convention that women alone in public must be 'public women'. Both Miss Climpson and Miss Murchison are investigators contracted with the novel's main detective, Lord Peter Wimsey. Sayers does show that the fear of being taken for a prostitute was still alive in the 1930s, in a scene from *Murder Must Advertise* (1933). Lord Peter masquerades as an advertising copywriter in this novel, but is seen in his own character by two secretaries from the agency, who try to say hello to him. To avoid destroying his cover persona, he has to pretend not to know them and to act as if they are prostitutes soliciting his business. While

Miss Rossiter flushes a 'fiery crimson' at the moment of the rebuff, her shame is short-lived, as a minute later the two women think they see the man being arrested, and Miss Rossiter's eyes are 'shining' at the thought of having been close to a possible celebrity criminal.⁴² The consequences of sexual shame are transitory, and although this may be Sayers' satiric commentary on the shallowness of many women, it is still a far better outcome than Monica Madden's.

Ngaio Marsh, perhaps because she was a colonial, seems not to have taken the joys of London freedom for granted as English writers did, and therefore her novels depict it more lavishly. In *Death of a Peer* (originally published as *A Surfeit of Lampreys*, 1940), she provides two odes to the allure of London in the eyes of her New Zealander heroine, Roberta Grey. In the second of these, Marsh duplicates Woolf's paean to public transportation:

Splendid, sang Roberta's heart, to mount the swaying bus and go cruising down Park Lane, splendid to plunge into the entrance of the tube station, to smell the unexpected sweetness of air that was driven through the world of underground, to sink far below the streets and catch a roaring subterranean train. ... Best of all, it seemed to Roberta, was this sense of independence. Nobody in the crowded tubes knew she was Roberta Grey from New Zealand. She didn't matter to them or they to her and she warmed to them for their very indifference. ... It was ridiculous to suppose that the Lampreys were in any sort of danger. For Roberta was twenty and abroad in London.⁴³

Here, in a nutshell, is the success of the New Woman, embodied in a woman the age to be her daughter. Woolf depicts the same generational shift in *Mrs Dalloway*, using 1890s flashbacks to contrast Clarissa Dalloway's New Woman past with her daughter's confidence. Elizabeth takes for granted things Clarissa had to fight for. That is the story of feminism itself, of course, here presented in its most positive form.

New Women in fact and fiction: education and careers

Flouting of minor social conventions and style was only the first major trait of the New Woman. The second, and to a person of a

materialist bent the most important, was the increase in education and careers among women during the period. During this period the overall number of women with jobs increased, 'the rise being concentrated among the middle classes, with a concomitant fall amongst female working-class employment. Between 1881 and 1911 there was an increase from 12.6 per cent to 23.7 per cent in the number of middle-class women in the total female workforce.'⁴⁴ Women of the 1890s were becoming doctors and typists, and many other things in between. The education that provided the foundation for such careers was burgeoning during this period, more in the area of secondary than in higher education; 80,000 girls were in secondary schools by 1898, but only 784 were in college in 1897.⁴⁵ While the new opportunities provided by Girton College, Cambridge (founded 1869) and all the educational institutions and new career types that followed it were certainly foundational in providing the material means of independence, New Woman writers themselves did not focus on such opportunities in their fiction. This may seem odd to us, since Virginia Woolf's famous materialist analysis of the origins of artistic genius in *A Room of One's Own* is so thoroughly entrenched in postmodern women's minds. We all agree that one must have a room of one's own and 500 pounds a year (or the modern equivalent) to be truly independent. We ask our daughters what they want to be when they grow up as routinely as we do our sons, and we think of this as the legacy of the suffragist generation. Heroines of romance novels written today invariably have jobs, and Female Gentlemen novels are similarly crammed with women who have careers. However, few women in New Woman novels have careers. There are some artists, musicians, and writers, but few who can support themselves through their work. In many ways, New Woman novels echo the givens of fiction that preceded them, and the young women in them are generally the same kind of marriageable daughters of the gentry who populate Trollope and Meredith novels. The difference is that they decline to follow the standard script of marriage offered in those novels. The large-scale assimilation of women with careers into the mainstream of fiction was left for later writers, and their inclusion no doubt explains much of the difference in the ethical ideal proposed by the later authors.

It is worth noting that one area of exception to this rule was the theater. Viv Gardner points out, in her introduction to a volume of

essays on New Woman playwrights, that the theater had provided careers for women long before typewriters and medical schools did, and that 'as performers, dramatists and managers, women in the theatre had anticipated the challenge of the New Woman to the establishment', though it was 'often at the expense of their own reputation and social position'.⁴⁶ Working actresses were, therefore, more active in organized feminism. Perhaps this phenomenon explains why Ngaio Marsh's novels have the feminist themes that they do. She was a fairly conventional writer in many ways, and the least concerned with gentlemanliness of the authors I am examining. But her novel featuring a working actress as protagonist, *Night at the Vulcan* (originally published as *Opening Night*, 1951), clearly shows the echoes of these earlier actresses' work in expanding roles for women. Martyn Tarne, the protagonist, is their inheritor and Marsh's most definite example of a Female Gentleman. The role of actresses in New Woman texts also sheds interesting light on Sayers' *Strong Poison*. While Miss Climpson and Harriet Vane are the more obvious female characters to analyze in that novel, an easily overlooked figure is Cremorna Garden, the notorious actress of the 1860s whose fortune – gained through bestowal of sexual favors 'for cash down', as her own lawyer describes it⁴⁷ – is the motive for the murder. Cremorna Garden herself is neither admired nor even treated with sympathy by the narrator – when Miss Climpson gains access through subterfuge to the suite where she lies dying, the narrator comments that 'It was the room of a woman without taste or moderation, who refused nothing and surrendered nothing, to whom the fact of possession had become the one steadfast reality in a world of loss and change.'⁴⁸ But the respectable middle-class family whose treatment of her created that world of loss and change are even more remorselessly criticized. Sayers' analysis highlights the consequences that sexual rebellion or career building had for women of a previous generation, without making any allowances for the unsavory characteristics they might have had to possess to succeed under such circumstances. Such an attitude is consistent with her unwavering insistence on honor as the ideal for women to aspire to; Cremorna Garden was clearly shrewd and successful, but not honorable except in the narrowest sense of giving good value for what she received. In this way, the Female Gentleman attempted to raise the standards beyond those of the New Woman. This is most

evident, as with Cremorna Garden, in issues of sexual morality and behavior.

New Women in fact and fiction: sexual relations

Latchkeys and divided skirts were the most common identifiers of the New Woman in cartoons and other popular media, and careers provided them the income to support those lifestyle habits. But the signature issue of New Woman novels is sexual morality – or immorality, in the eyes of their contemporary critics, who published essays with furious titles like ‘Literary Degenerates’, ‘The Fiction of Sexuality’, ‘Tommyrotics’, and ‘The Anti-Marriage League’. New Women advocated sexual frankness and open communication, and lived out that principle by pushing against the boundaries of what was considered proper to talk about in print. They certainly succeeded in this goal, and changed the placement of boundaries about what one could talk about permanently thereafter. Whether they achieved a change in the actual moral standards for sexual behavior is more debatable. While ‘bachelor motherhood’ and ‘free union’ were commonly understood to be the goals of New Women, that is an exaggerated and journalistic vision of what was, instead, a movement to reform marriage by discussing what a sexually successful marriage would mean.⁴⁹ Still, even as reformers of marriage rather than an ‘anti-marriage league’ (to use Margaret Oliphant’s notorious phrase), New Woman novels did not effect great changes in their own day.⁵⁰ Middlebrow interwar authors continued this incremental work, not by raising the cudgels for free love, but by insisting that the same principles of morality that govern other areas of life should also apply in the sexual realm. This shift laid the groundwork for more radical changes in women’s status in later decades, moving the work of feminism beyond the issue of marriage alone.

New Woman novelists followed two basic approaches toward sex. The ‘purity school’ typified by Sarah Grand generally focused on the pernicious effects of the Victorian double standard, in which women were expected to be pure and men were allowed to be quite impure with no repercussions. These novels depict the tragic outcomes of such a double standard. Innocent wives and children ravaged by syphilis and descending into madness are marshaled up to call for men to live up to the same high standard of purity that women

had been expected to adhere to. The second main approach, which Hugh Stutfield dubbed the 'neurotic school' in an influential essay from 1897, encompassed such diverse authors as George Egerton and Mona Caird.⁵¹ These works tend to depict more of the physical sensations of sex, often reveling in it, but sometimes revolted by it. These novels are more self-consciously radical, but their endings are in most cases just as pessimistic or conventional as those of the purity school. New Woman novels of both types might attack marriage itself as impure because of its resemblance to prostitution, and might argue for 'free union' or 'bachelor motherhood' as its alternative – not necessarily in a spirit of countercultural sexual experimentation, but to guarantee strong children.

New Woman 'purity' novels often leave in place many of the moral assumptions of the Victorian era about men and women's differences, even while agitating for more sexual freedom for women, or for 'bachelor motherhood'. Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did* (1895) preserves the standard Victorian idea of women as morally superior to men and more pure, inverting only the specific application. Herminia Barton believes marriage to be wrong, the equivalent of slavery or prostitution; she simply treats every mention of marriage the way a conventional Victorian woman would treat a mention of adultery, and vice versa. This is not a reversal of the idea that women are more pure than men, but a structural duplicate. Herminia uses her moral superiority to influence her lover to her way of thinking, just as a Victorian girl might reform a rake. Similarly, Sarah Grand argued explicitly in her nonfiction that women must purify and teach men because they were more moral than men, using an analogy to child-rearing: a woman is naturally the teacher of a child, and 'man morally is in his infancy'.⁵² It is easy to see how this fundamental allegiance to essentialism would make it easy for New Woman ideals to be folded back into traditional values, once the novelty of hearing sex discussed openly wore off.

Mona Caird, a member of Stutfield's 'neurotic school', was Sarah Grand's polar opposite in every way. She argued in her journalistic writing for economic independence for women, contract marriage rather than life marriage, and state-supported daycare.⁵³ Caird frequently described children as instruments of the oppression and degradation of their mothers. For example, the main character of *Daughters of Danaus* insists that 'Motherhood, in our present social

state, is the sign and seal as well as the means and method of a woman's bondage. It forges chains of her own flesh and blood; it weaves cords of her own love and instinct. She agonizes, and the fruit of her agony is not even legally hers. Name me a position more abject!⁵⁴ Hadria's speech here inspires shocked disavowal from her sister-in-law, to whom she makes it, and Caird herself inspired exactly such disapproval from figures like Grant Allen.⁵⁵ Even Caird, however, rarely depicted a heroine successfully living out her radical principles or choosing self-development over self-sacrifice.

Caird's radical principles were not even shared by every other 'neurotic' school author. Many texts reside somewhere in the middle, more daring than Grand's purity, but not radically attempting to alter the nature of relations between the sexes as Caird did. George Egerton's 'A Cross Line' (1893), for example, one of the flagship texts of Stutfield's 'neurotic' school, is quite bold in depicting its heroine's sexuality. She engages in extremely heated and explicitly described foreplay with her husband, and the scene closes as he 'crushes her soft little body to him and carries her off to her room'.⁵⁶ Her sexual fantasies in a famous passage about Arabian horses and Greek dancing are even more lurid, and are described with the lyrical prose common to Decadent writing. She thinks of her sexual energy as an essential part of every woman's nature: 'the eternal wildness, the untamed primitive savage temperament that lurks in the mildest, best woman'.⁵⁷ All this quasi-pornographic writing certainly challenges Victorian reticence, but when a would-be lover tries to capitalize on the heroine's sexuality to try to persuade her to run off with him, he finds that wildness has a limit. She tells him that his plan of living on a yacht is enticing, but not because it means living with him, only because of the freedom of life on a ship itself. She tells him that women would rule the world if they didn't need love, because 'At heart we care nothing for laws, nothing for systems. All your elaborately reasoned codes for controlling morals or man do not weigh a jot with us against an impulse, an instinct.' But women's wildness is tamed by affection, and "We forge our own chains in a moment of softness, and then" (bitterly) "we may as well wear them with a good grace. Perhaps many of our seeming contradictions are only the outward evidences of inward chafing."⁵⁸ All inward chafing is banished in the heroine, however, by her timely discovery that she is pregnant; her nervous 'qualms', previously assumed to be signs

of her neuroses, are now revealed merely as morning sickness. The prospect of motherhood transforms her from a capricious and often abrasive person, to a softly laughing woman who kisses her maid in a fit of affection over their shared experience of babies.⁵⁹

The maid is unmarried, and Egerton takes the opportunity for a brief aside to make it clear that it is unfair to judge a woman for bearing a child out of wedlock. But the haze of maternal joy that fogs the end of the story provides an excellent example of the boomerang pattern of much New Woman fiction. Potentially subversive statements earlier in the text are contained quite neatly. And even the supposed rebellion earlier was nothing more than a restatement of the essentialism of earlier Victorians. The wild, untamed, primitive instinct that leads the heroine to fantasize about riding horses and dancing in revealing costumes is no different from the 'carnal magdalen' Poovey described as the constitutive dark side of the Victorian angel, whose supposed susceptibility to sexual passion justified holding women to a higher moral standard. Some commentators have tried to find a subversive trend in the heroine's fantasies, as examples of Cixous's *écriture féminine* exposing the 'staging of the feminine' in a way that undercuts the essentialism of the feminine image that is depicted being staged,⁶⁰ or as a deconstruction of essentialism itself that shows the 'eternal feminine' to be multiple and fragmentary.⁶¹ But such readings rely heavily on very specific passages in the story rather than the total arc of the plot. One cannot ignore the way that the pregnancy erases the narrator's supposed wildness.

Egerton was typical of a whole strand of New Woman novels that celebrated and sexualized maternity. Egerton was somewhat more daring than the rest, in that she allowed maternity to be the right even of unmarried women, as in the case of the maid in 'A Cross Line' – and that was Grant Allen's one claim to radicalism as well. But in many other ways, one cannot imagine a stronger contrast than that between Egerton and someone like Caird, whose principles were strikingly similar to those of modern anti-essentialist feminists, and whose novels, far from celebrating the divine maternal instinct, contained many overt denunciations of the degrading and enslaving condition of motherhood. The one commonality between them was their use of excessive emotion, or even hysteria, to prove their characters' moral superiority by 'spiritualising and moralising maternity and womanhood'.⁶² Such a moral economy was not even as much

of a challenge to Victorian gender assumptions as Herminia Barton's 'pure' rejection of marriage, since it took Victorian moral assumptions to an extreme rather than inverting them.

Heroines of New Woman novels of every type feel everything very keenly, and often the only difference from more traditional Victorian fiction is the vehemence with which they talk about those feelings, especially their 'nerve-storms' and any feelings they have linked to sex and motherhood. The critics of the time were undoubtedly sexist in many of their strictures on the literary style of these novels, but it is hard not to feel some sympathy with them, because the neurotic behavior and speech of many New Woman heroines is simply irritating. One often wants to take the main characters of these novels and shake them until they act more sensibly. Strikingly, Female Gentleman novels of the 1930s contain several scenes in which the stronger-minded heroines do exactly that to comically hysterical or neurotic minor female characters. The general role reversal of the interwar era, in which women were to be cool and rational, while men expressed their shell shock through neurasthenia, led to a sharp revulsion against neurotic heroines. None of the Female Gentleman authors I examine had any patience for 'nerves' in female characters, nor in male characters unless it was the result of shell shock. The rejection is usually comic, but quite firm, and far more radically feminist than an idealization of hysteria.

One further similarity between the different flavors of New Woman novels is their assumption that women were oppressed by the sexual double standard, and that what must take place to redress women's wrongs was 'a leveling-up of male morals' to correspond to the standards of purity enforced on women.⁶³ Female Gentleman novels, by contrast, attempted to level *women* up to a higher standard of virtue in every area other than sex. Victorian ideology separated the natures of the two sexes so thoroughly that women's virtue was seen to consist solely in their sexual behavior. Sarah Grand's inverted version of emotionally inflected purity was not epistemologically different, and still envisioned women as on a higher moral plane than men, striving to bring men up to their sexually enlightened level. But women were routinely depicted by Victorians as deficient in honor in other areas of life – courage, truthfulness, approach to debt – and were given a free pass in these areas because of their femininity. Mr Bruff of *The Moonstone* is not seriously disturbed by the idea that women

lack honor, because as a Victorian man of the world he accepts it cynically as a commonplace. By contrast, Female Gentleman novels attempt to extend the ethos of 'playing fair' to sexual relationships as well. Thus they start from the assumption that women need to be brought up to a new level, not that men do.

In the course of proving this point, the 1930s authors do not depict shockingly outré sexual relationships as frequently as New Woman novelists did. It is always marriage or nothing for the Female Gentlemen – but marriage played out between equals who embrace the same standards and values. Such a marriage of equals was in fact the stated goal of the New Woman authors as well; they were not actually trying to abolish marriage, despite their critics' claims. Many New Women tried to depict the New Man who would make a marriage of equals possible, but as Sally Ledger points out, although the desire for a 'free' or 'comradely' relationship between equals is common in New Woman novels, 'in the 1890s such "free" unions, unencumbered by the letter of the law, could be projected only in a utopian way but not fully realised in literary language'.⁶⁴ The nature of the New Man was often that he wanted a woman who was just like him. As the husband in Egerton's 'A Cross Line' puts it, 'being married to you is like chumming with a chap!'⁶⁵ Female Gentleman novels depict the same masculine desire frequently and consistently, as I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 3. However, while Female Gentleman novels are able, 40 years later, to build a positive vision of marriage, they are not free to explore any positive aspects of 'free union', and require the legal tie for an honorable relationship. Of them all, only Sayers had the courage to depict some non-marriage relationships. But while Harriet Vane notoriously had lived with a man outside marriage, her subsequent years-long depression seems to make that a hollow blow for feminism at best. Only Harriet's relationship with her eventual husband shows Sayers' principles to be the same as those of her New Woman predecessors – with the difference that women have a lot of ground to make up if they are to pull equal with men in their honor. To make a woman's honor focus on the relationship itself and not merely on physical sex acts is more radical, ultimately.

New Woman novels do show some concern with honor. Ann Ardis identifies two main strategies for writers of the period to end their fiction: the 'boomerang books' already discussed, which were by far

more common, and a less common strategy, the 'retreat with honour'.⁶⁶ Ardis takes this phrase from *The Odd Women*, in which the narrator uses it to describe Rhoda Nunn's decision to reject Everard Barfoot, and all hope of future sexual fulfillment, because Barfoot was not sincere about his belief in free love. For Gissing the retreat is about celibacy, and the honor is to be found in Rhoda choosing to deny herself something she wants rather than violate her other New Woman principles. Ardis expands the term to cover novels in which the New Woman has to disavow or sharply rein in ambitions in all areas of life, not just her sexuality, as a means of self-defense after realizing how intractable the outer world is. In boomerang books the heroine is punished or disillusioned; in retreat books the heroine retains her ideals and is not dead, mad, or impoverished, but is still unable to achieve her utopian goals. This type of ending is rewritten by Female Gentleman novels as well.

The revision is quite direct in the case of the novel from which Ardis draws her term, *The Odd Women*. In this novel, the New Woman, Rhoda Nunn, maintains that she has a principled objection to living with a man, and thinks independence is the ideal state for women. Everard Barfoot pursues her romantically as a way of trying to dominate her, with the goal of forcing her to give up this ideal:

The hour had come for his last trial of Rhoda, and he felt some confidence as to the result. If her mettle endured his test, if she declared herself willing not only to abandon her avowed ideal of life [singlehood], but to defy the world's opinion by becoming his wife without forms of mutual bondage – she was the woman he had imagined, and by her side he would go cheerfully on his way as a married man. Legally married; the proposal of free union was to be a test only. Loving her as he had never thought to love, there still remained with him so much of the temper in which he first wooed her that he could be satisfied with nothing short of unconditional surrender. Delighting in her independence of mind, he still desired to see her in complete subjugation to him, to inspire her with unreflecting passion.⁶⁷

Barfoot never gets this surrender, however, as Rhoda does not pass his 'test', and he has to offer marriage as a compromise. As far as the narrator is concerned, this is a violation of Rhoda's own ideals,

a failure of her courage, and Gissing's *New Woman* is not a perfect ideal – certainly not to Barfoot, who decides she was not a 'glorious rebel' after all.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, Rhoda is dissatisfied with herself for giving up her independence at all. When a letter comes presenting Rhoda with circumstantial evidence that Everard has been unfaithful, she tries to force him to clear himself, while he stands on her own idea of honor in refusing to do so, pointing out that if the cases were reversed he would be wrong in disbelieving her: 'If I charged you with dishonour you would only have your word to offer in reply. So it is with me. And my word is bluntly rejected. You try me rather severely.'⁶⁹ The narrator states plainly that Rhoda wants him to clear himself because she wants it to be a 'triumph' over him, and that Everard desires exactly the same thing, for her to come back to him without any evidence of his fidelity, in 'inevitable submission' and 'the anguish of broken pride'.⁷⁰ Ultimately, the relationship fails because neither will give an inch. But although Barfoot seems more a villain to modern eyes, nevertheless it is the case that Rhoda Nunn acts from motives other than honor. I believe the chapter title 'Retreat with Honour' is meant ironically by Gissing, who was no feminist.

Dorothy Sayers' *Strong Poison* provides a parallel situation, and its altered outcome is a clear instance of the difference between *New Woman* and *Female Gentleman* honor. The novel begins with the judge summing up for the jury the murder case against Harriet Vane, who is accused of killing her lover, Philip Boyes. The judge is astonished to find that her only motive for killing him would be, not his having ruined her, but having offered to 'regularise the situation. ... because, after persuading her against her will to adopt his principles of conduct, he then renounced those principles and so, as she says, "made a fool of her".'⁷¹ As she explains it later to Lord Peter Wimsey, 'I couldn't stand being put on probation, like an office-boy, to see if I was good enough to be condescended to. I quite thought he was honest when he said he didn't believe in marriage – and it turned out that it was a test, to see whether my devotion was abject enough. Well, it wasn't.'⁷² This is exactly the same spirit in which Everard had proposed to Rhoda: it was a test, and he thinks to himself later that he would only have needed to offer legal marriage 'if all went well ... if, for instance, she became a mother'.⁷³ Had Rhoda accepted the original proposal of free union, she would have found herself in

the circumstance Harriet did. Rhoda is saved from this fate because she does not live up to her own ideals; she rejects free union with Everard out of fear and pride, not out of a principled desire for matrimony. Harriet, then, begins the novel as a stronger version of Rhoda, who has been punished even more severely than Rhoda has. Though Wimsey clears her of the murder charge, she is so scarred by the experience that it takes him several more novels to persuade her that a man can really mean that he wants an equal marriage with a wife of independent mind. Given the circumstances, it is realistic for Harriet to take time to believe him, but the fact that she eventually does so is a powerful statement of optimism. More importantly, Sayers does not trifle with her female characters. Harriet is never less than honorable; she has personality flaws as all humans do, but she does not violate her own principles, and she survives her boomerang to find happiness. That difference encapsulates the contrast between New Women and Female Gentlemen.

Interlude: literary history and literary value

In moving forward in time 30 years, from the 1890s to the 1920s, from the New Woman to her daughters whom I have named Female Gentlemen, it is time to return to the question of the stratification of literary value. The most important literary shift between these decades was the completion of the split between highbrow and lowbrow culture that began during the late Victorian period. It is almost a truism of the history of modernism that the high cultural authors of that period defined their aesthetic style in opposition to mass culture, in the same way that the Aesthetic and Decadent writers of the 1890s did, but far more thoroughly and with a new structure of the publishing business to reinforce their claims. The breakup of the circulating library system in the 1890s, and the subsequent death of the three-volume novel, led to new prominence for books that people bought themselves. Suddenly, the market for 'low' novels exploded, and by the 1920s the literary marketplace had stratified even further, with a 'middlebrow' category that has received only recent scholarly attention. During the decades between the New Woman and the Female Gentleman, genre forms such as mystery, romance, and science fiction were born and pigeonholed as commodities, while highbrow authors resisted this process (and

succeeded ultimately only in creating for themselves a different publishing pigeonhole, the tradeback literary novel). They aggressively figured mass culture as the Other of modernism, and gendered that mass culture as female, as I discussed in Chapter 1. So, interestingly enough, did the male writers of the 1890s, who wrote adventure fiction and 'new realism' (a sort of imitation naturalism) in order to 'de-feminise the literary marketplace'.⁷⁴ The ostensible enemy of serious literary fiction in both decades was formula fiction written only for entertainment, as it had been even earlier in the nineteenth century, when sensation fiction of the 1860s was derided because it was 'mass-produced for mass-consumption, based on repeated and hence predictable formulae'.⁷⁵ From the 1860s through to the 1920s, following a formula was by definition feminine, because real literature was 'the unique expression of individual genius' and this individuality was coded masculine.⁷⁶

At the same time that female authors were being edged out of serious literary consideration because they wrote in formulas for the masses, they were also being derided by literary critics of the 1890s because they wrote in too feminine a style. Ann Ardis notes that many anti-New Woman writers in the periodical press deplored the writing style that they saw New Women as popularizing: heated, lush, highly descriptive, even decadent. This style, of which George Egerton's *Keynotes* and its followers in the *Keynotes* series published by John Lane were the leading example, was specifically described as effeminate by critics, because, as Arthur Waugh put it, 'The man lives by ideas; the woman by sensations' and therefore 'It is unmanly, it is effeminate, it is inartistic to gloat over pleasure, to revel in immoderation, to become passion's slave; and literature demands as much calmness of judgment, as much reticence, as life itself.'⁷⁷ Critics extended this condemnation beyond the New Woman focus on sexual material, into a general opposition to a supposedly feminized way of looking at the world. William Courtney complained that women novelists have abandoned the 'neutrality of the artistic mind' and 'impartiality' to their characters, but instead 'tak[e] sides', and thus lose 'formal control' of their work.⁷⁸

Feminist critics do not necessarily dispute Waugh's or Courtney's descriptions of New Woman writing, but they embrace the style as a form of *écriture féminine*.⁷⁹ The impressionistic, imagistic, and proto-stream-of-consciousness writing in Egerton's stories, in Hadria's

journey to Paris in *The Daughters of Danaus*, in Grand's *The Beth Book*, and in many shorter passages from other leading New Woman authors, lends itself to one common strategy feminist critics have adopted in trying to recuperate New Woman writing; that is, they point out how, ironically, New Woman novelists often anticipated or pioneered the same literary techniques that modernist writers would later claim as their own inventions. Such techniques earned them censure as 'too hysterical' in the 1890s, but when adopted by male writers such as Joyce or Lawrence, they became high art. Ann Ardis began this trend in her 1990 book *New Women, New Novels*, and the entire focus of her study is to reinsert New Woman novels into the literary genealogy of modernism. Many other writers have echoed the argument that New Woman novels are the 'pioneering texts' of modernism.⁸⁰

This approach has several limitations, not least of which is that it assumes 'feminine' and 'feminist' are the same, when they are not. Not every feminist embraces the essentialist assumptions behind the concept of *écriture féminine*, and although one can appreciate the irony of attempting to remake modernism in the image of what it professed to hate (femininity, mass culture), there are other aesthetics that can be equally valuable. Moreover, modernism itself was not monolithic. The language of neutrality and impartiality in William Courtney's criticism of New Women recalls nothing so much as Virginia Woolf's famous discussion in *A Room of One's Own* of the luminous and neutral quality of Shakespeare's genius (especially because Courtney himself refers to Shakespeare as an example). Woolf depicts both Shakespeare and Jane Austen as being geniuses because they could free themselves from the desire to take sides, and she devalues Charlotte Brontë in comparison because Brontë could not free herself of her feeling of injustice toward women. Following this lead, Female Gentleman writers embody the neutrality and control desired by Waugh and Courtney. Their style is uniformly cool, restrained, and ironic, never immoderate or sensual. Their characters speak in elliptical dialogue embodying the very soul of reticence. As I discussed in Chapter 1, this shift in style was typical of the interwar period in general. Significantly, women of this period took on formerly masculine traits, whereas men became frivolous and took on previously effeminate traits, including emotional fragility.

At the same time, Female Gentleman novels contain not the slightest hint of *écriture féminine*, and they are undoubtedly the products of mass culture. The authors I am examining wrote bestselling novels and were all concerned with their sales and reception by the public. Literarily, then, Female Gentleman novels are an odd hybrid. They are like their New Woman ancestors in their bestseller status and in their thematic focus; they are like their modernist contemporaries in some aspects of their style, and unlike them in others. They both are and are not the Other of modernism. In reclaiming them for a contemporary scholarly examination, I do not wish to redefine either modernism or good literature. The middlebrow interwar style, with its constant irony and emotional restraint, appeals to me, but I enjoy highbrow modernist novels as well. Fortunately, it is possible to value both, without having to remake literary history.

3

Anatomy of the Female Gentleman

In female-authored British mystery novels of the interwar period, a common picture emerges of a particular idealized female whose traits are derived from those of the nineteenth-century gentleman. Superficially, the Female Gentleman of the 1920s and 1930s closely resembles the New Woman in terms of lifestyle. Female Gentlemen are very likely to dress, talk, and act like their brothers. They are often 'hard-mouthed, cigarette-smoking females', as one hostile young man describes them in Dorothy Sayers' 1928 *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*.¹ Cigarette smoking was perhaps not a distinctive trait by the modern period, and indeed characters of either sex who do not smoke are more unusual in these novels than ones who do. But the Female Gentlemen also tend to speak and even dress like men. They use previously unladylike slang and profanity – Miss Meteyard of Sayers' *Murder Must Advertise* (1933) is introduced as a Somerville graduate who can make 'the vulgarest limericks ever recited within these chaste walls', while Dulcie Duveen of Christie's *The Murder on the Links* (1923) begins the novel by looking out a train window 'with the brief and forcible ejaculation "Hell!"'² They employ what the narrator of Georgette Heyer's *Death in the Stocks* (1935) refers to as 'paralysing frankness'.³ They are outspoken, and the Angel in the House's tendency to flatter and soothe men – what Woolf referred to as the 'magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size'⁴ – is completely absent from their manner. Even the heroines of Heyer's romances, more bound by the conventions of the Regency era, take pains not to be thought 'missish' by being too delicate in their speech. The mystery novels are populated

by women who wear ties and dress in the 'severely tailored' coats and skirts favored by Dinah Fawcett of *The Unfinished Clue* (1934).⁵ They are more likely to like big dogs than lapdogs; Georgette Heyer has no fewer than three early heroines who breed bull-terriers, while Margery Allingham's dancer Slippers Bellew is prominent in *Dancers in Mourning* mainly for the Great Dane that travels with her everywhere.

Female Gentlemen generally have the same tastes in art, books, and music as the men of the novels: Ngaio Marsh's *Artists in Crime* (1938), which introduces the painter Agatha Troy, is the most thorough exposition of artistic taste as a gentlemanly trait, but Sayers and Heyer also used the bohemian London art world as a setting, and artistic taste is an index of a character's worth for both writers. The murderer of *Death in the Stocks*, Violet Williams, is a woman who does commercial illustration work that is openly scorned by her fiancé, an avant-garde painter who tells her 'You've got about as much sense of colour and line as Tony's bull-terriers.'⁶

Kenneth Vereker is hardly a hero, but his artistic judgment is never questioned by the narrator or other characters. Throughout the novel he is the prime suspect and Violet is never even hinted at as the murderer, but the narrator makes it clear that we are to prefer him to her because of their artistic differences. When she is revealed as a criminal it is no surprise; she murdered for money, just as she had sacrificed her artistic talent for money. By contrast, when Margery Allingham introduces the minor character Ann Held in *Police at the Funeral* (1931), one might at first be tempted to think of her as a suspect – after all, the friend of the heroine does sometimes turn out to have a shady background. But once Campion has seen her study in Cambridge, it is clear that she must be on the side of the angels, because her room has no clichéd prints of Florence, but instead features 'Modern American etchings, including two Rosenbergs', furniture that is 'good, sparse, and comfortable', with drapes that are 'bright without being noisy' – 'A friendly and unusual room in which to find a research student', the narrator summarizes.⁷ Charles J. Rzepka provides a contrasting view of the value of art in these novels by focusing on Dorothy Sayers, who consistently satirized avant-garde art (painting, music, and writing) in the early Wimsey novels. Rzepka argues that the sculptor Marjorie Phelps is admirable in the narrator's eyes because she focuses on sales rather than highbrow

concerns – that is to say, she is a ‘professional’.⁸ Rzepka overstates the commercialism of this character’s art, however, and he also overlooks all of the admirably supportive artist friends of Harriet Vane in the later novels. On balance, Sayers treats art in much the same way that I have shown Heyer, Allingham, and Marsh doing: as an index of a character’s worth, and crucially, with the same standards of taste applied to women as to men.

The transformation of New Women into Female Gentlemen is much more than a matter of taste, however, and more substantial character traits qualify them as gentlemen. For Victorians, the term ‘gentleman’ had encompassed two major areas. The first was class position – birth and ‘breeding’, the latter of which was hard to define. The ambiguity felt by the middlebrow novel toward actual aristocrats is reflected in the birth class of the Female Gentlemen, most of whom are upper-middle-class rather than aristocratic in origin. The second major area is morality; the ideal gentleman was expected to possess a dizzying array of moral virtues. Karen Volland Waters provides a survey of late nineteenth-century conduct literature that gives one a sense of how impossible this ideal might have been to achieve in reality. Words like ‘honor’ and ‘courage’ recur frequently, these being relics of the older aristocratic code associated with noble birth. But a gentleman was also expected by one writer to have ‘refined feelings’,⁹ yet at the same time a ‘capacity to submit passion to reason’.¹⁰ Many other moral virtues were potentially part of a gentleman’s arsenal; Waters gives a composite showing that he should be ‘courteous, affable, kind, deferential, temperate, unassuming, clean, pure, considerate, courageous, understanding, inoffensive, unobtrusive, socially adroit, truthful, civil, circumspect, sympathetic, respectful, unaffected, and adaptable’.¹¹ If one adds thrifty and reverent, one has a Boy Scout. This list contains many qualities a reader of Victorian novels will associate more with women and servants than with upper-class men. The older aristocratic code of gentlemanliness, in which dueling was a key sign of one’s status, laid far more emphasis on the overtly masculine traits of courage and physical prowess, along with a healthy sense of one’s own worth, not the ‘restraint and diffidence’ one sees in late Victorian gentlemen.¹² Destroying that older notion of proving one’s status with the point of one’s sword had been the work of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and novelists (from Richardson through Dickens) are often

credited with the change. But if the term 'gentleman' had already taken on certain feminine traits, it is perhaps no surprise that women would adapt it for themselves after World War I had shaken gender roles enough to allow for wholesale revision.

These postwar revisions pared down the number of personality traits to something more manageable, and definitely more modern – in the sense of spare, cool, and minimalist. As Nicola Humble describes the new romance of the interwar years, both men and women laid great emphasis on 'reticence' and emotional 'evasion', since the men had been damaged by the war, and the women had become 'competent, assured, and unemotional' in taking over their roles.¹³ A surface emotional detachment became one of the key features of gentlemanliness for both men and women, averting unseemly displays of nerves and the attendant discomfort others might feel – a form of being considerate for others. At the same time, the ideal woman of the period was often a 'comradely' girl who had the same skills a man did, and could, through her ability to sympathize with his interests and pursuits, crack open a war-wounded man's brittle shell and reveal the emotions underneath.¹⁴ While the idea of a man with a hidden center of emotional tenderness brought out by the heroine recalls the clichés of romance in any period,¹⁵ the idea that the woman must be a true comrade to a man to produce this effect was new.

In order to be a comrade to a man, a woman had to be his intellectual equal, which Humble discusses. She does not discuss the way that this idea of 'comradeliness' implied that a woman also had to be much more like a man in other ways – not the essentially different Angel of Victorian domestic ideology, but a Wollstonecraftian 'human creature' whose essential features were all similar to a man's. Specifically, she had to have the same values, which writers of the Victorian period were often content to say that women did not have. This is the reason that the middlebrow female characters of these interwar years display the same courage and honor that the men do, since a man cannot relate to a woman as a comrade or equal without speaking the same language and sharing the same basic assumptions. Oddly enough, it is Georgette Heyer's romance novels that make this point most obvious, though Dorothy Sayers' late novels also explore the same territory. Courage and honor were coded as aristocratic traits, and indeed the Female Gentlemen of this period flirt with aristocratic identities in their class positions as well. In Heyer's

romance novels, which are all historical, the heroines are usually upper-class, though a significant number are upper-middle-class. In the mystery novels (including Heyer's), which are all contemporary to their date of publication, the heroines are almost uniformly upper-middle-class in origin. Frequently, the heroines of all the novelists are economically tainted in some way that requires them to inhabit a lower sphere temporarily, and this loss of class status often initiates the plot which proves their gentlemanliness.

To sum up, then, a Female Gentleman is: 1) upper-middle-class in birth, with some exceptions; 2) physically and/or morally courageous (resulting in self-reliance and economic independence); 3) honorable, in all the many senses that the term has acquired over the years; 4) possessed of strong emotions and the desire for emotional connection, but able to subordinate emotion to reason and present a reticent surface, which frequently results in a detached and ironic manner. I will illustrate these traits in order from the most traditional, social class, to the most distinctively modern, rationalism.

Birth and social class

As I discussed in Chapter 1, Nicola Humble argues that the agenda of the feminine middlebrow novel was to make upper-middle-class values dominant over those of other fractions of the middle class, and to do so in part by 'annexing' upper-class identities. Therefore it is no surprise that, with rare exceptions, none of these authors attempt to take major female characters from any other section of society than the upper-middle and aristocratic classes, but that in most cases something taints or problematizes the characters' class positions. This taint is often the factor that stimulates them to become gentlemen, rather than merely ladies; perhaps once their class position is uncertain, it is just as easy to trade up rather than be satisfied with traditional ladyhood. The most paradigmatic character in this regard is Dorothy Sayers' Harriet Vane, an Oxford-educated doctor's daughter who writes detective novels and moves in Bloomsbury circles before being falsely accused of her lover's murder. Proving her innocence is Lord Peter Wimsey's case in *Strong Poison* (1930); he pursues her romantically through several other novels and marries her in the final book of the series, *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937). Harriet's own feeling that in living with her lover without marriage and in

being accused of murder she has tainted herself irrevocably is a major bar to her romance with Peter. But, as one of Peter's mother's friends puts it in *Busman's Honeymoon*, 'Compared with the riff-raff we are getting in now from the films and the night-clubs, a country doctor's daughter, even with a poet in her past, is a miracle of respectability,' while the disapproval of the current duchess, Peter's sister-in-law, is 'snobbish nonsense about misalliances'.¹⁶

One of the major themes of *Busman's Honeymoon* is to depict the way that Lord Peter's impeccably traditional aristocratic identity is 'annexed' by the newcomer, Harriet. As she and Peter first meet the various denizens of the country village where they are honeymooning, all of whom will be players in the murder mystery about to envelop them, Harriet is suddenly seized with a vision of Peter as the embodiment of the traditional English class system:

She understood now why it was that with all his masking attitudes, all his cosmopolitan self-adaptations, all his odd spiritual reticences and escapes, he yet carried about with him that permanent atmosphere of security. He belonged to an ordered society, and this was it. More than any of the friends in her own world, he spoke the familiar language of her childhood. In London, anybody, at any moment, might do or become anything. But in a village – no matter what village – they were all immutably themselves; parson, organist, sweep, duke's son and doctor's daughter, moving like chessmen upon their allotted squares. She was curiously excited. She thought, 'I have married England.' Her fingers tightened on his arm.¹⁷

This passage presents the fantasy of blood and pedigree that I discussed in Chapter 1 in an almost explicitly sexualized form. But the attraction of rank is also a desire for a sense of security and order in an era that seemed painfully chaotic in its new freedom. Harriet here realigns herself with the traditional class position of her birth (doctor's daughter), rather than with her acquired Bloomsbury freedom.

This passage may seem at first to provide clear confirmation of the standard critical view of detective fiction as politically conservative. But the key to Harriet's excitement is more complex. That other London world where anyone can become anything is always available, despite Harriet's momentary fantasy that class makes them

'immutably themselves'. She and Peter are the only two whose 'selves' are described in relative terms rather than substantive ones, which subtly reinforces the idea that they can become anyone else if they like. A doctor's daughter can also be a writer; a duke's son can also be a detective. The parson, organist, and sweep are not so flexible. Most notably, this passage emphasizes the annexation of aristocracy by a daughter of the professional middle class. Harriet's excitement stems from her recognition that she has *married* the aristocrat, possesses him permanently. Here she tightens her grip on his arm, later she declares 'You are mine, you are mine, all mine' in a moment of romantic intimacy.¹⁸ Susan Rowland argues that this passage is a key part of the novel's project to 're-sacralise the country house as a source of conservative and nostalgic Englishness', but she also insists that the otherness of London, progressive gender relations, and modernity remain crucial to that '*re-creation*' of England – that is, Harriet is consciously making Peter a symbol of England, not just discovering that he is one.¹⁹

Other detective authors of this period similarly re-create the class relations of England through conscious examination, most notably Margery Allingham. In the relatively late *More Work for the Undertaker* (1948), Allingham presents the fantastically eccentric Palinode family, who have maintained everything in their world as if it were still Edwardian, including their relations with all the tradespeople on their block, whom they consider to be their responsibility. The youngest of them admits that 'We Palinodes have carried one kind of squirearchy to its ridiculous conclusion' but justifies it by saying 'London is made up of many villages.'²⁰ The binary between London and village, center and periphery, is illusory. Yet the 'villagers' merely tolerate the squirely attitude of the Palinodes after all, and in fact the precipitating murder's method is based entirely on one of these patronized neighbors taking advantage of one of their preserved Edwardian habits. Allingham's novels chronicle the real change in class relations from the beginning of my period to the end. *More Work for the Undertaker* seems in many ways like a revision of her 1931 *Police at the Funeral*. Both novels feature large families of extremely eccentric and elderly gentry, holdovers from an earlier age. But in the earlier novel, the Faraday family is the central focus of the dramatic tension and real psychological horror of the story. By 1948, the Palinodes are more like stage dressing, serving as interesting scenery

for the real drama, which happens among the small shopkeepers and tradespeople of the street. Allingham's success at inserting the aristocratic Albert Campion into this mixed milieu attests to her sensitivity to changing English culture.

At the end of *Busman's Honeymoon*, Peter takes Harriet to visit his ancestral home at Duke's Denver, a scene which allows Sayers to drive home the triumph of the middle class while at the same time gently ridiculing the very desire for aristocratic trappings that fuels the fantasy. As they approach the house, Peter is greeted fulsomely by the lodgekeeper, a loyal family retainer, and Harriet quizzes him about the features of the house – will it have peacocks on the terrace? a deer in the park? a driveway a mile long? Peter admits that it does have 'all the story-book things'.²¹ The most story-book thing of all is the family ghost, who graciously permits Harriet to see him before the sun is even fully down. Harriet isn't sure whether to believe the family is making fun of her in telling her the man she met in the library was a ghost, until they assure her that her snobby sister-in-law – the current duchess – can't see ghosts and refuses to believe in them. Harriet's acceptance by 'the family spooks' comically but clearly sets the seal on her right to be considered a true member of the family.²² She has acquired the class standing to be a gentleman.

The 'story-book' aspect of blood and class is less apparent in Sayers' other works, although she does present a few other female characters like Harriet. Marjorie Phelps, the sculptor who has a sort of Platonic affair with Peter in some of the early novels, and Miss Meteyard, the Oxford-educated advertising copywriter in *Murder Must Advertise* (1933), are both members of the upper-middle-class tainted by their associations with commerce or bohemianism. Both characters are firmly contained within the modern London scene, however, and never come close to capturing Peter as Harriet does. Lord Peter's sister, Lady Mary, however, presents an interesting inverse case to Harriet. As a duke's daughter, Mary Wimsey has a much higher birth position than most characters of middlebrow novels. We learn in *Clouds of Witness* (1927), however, that she has spent her young adulthood trying to give up that position. During World War I she had done nursing work in London, and became a communist. She even tried to marry a communist agitator, but was forbidden by the family because the man was not a gentleman – when Peter's friend Charles Parker, a detective, asks the lodgekeeper 'Was he a

gentleman?’ the woman hesitates, and the detective decides he was ‘Not quite quite’.²³ Most middlebrow protagonists are just one step above that level. Goyles proves that he is not a gentleman by virtue rather than by birth, however. Lady Mary spends much of *Clouds of Witness* shielding Goyles from suspicion of a murder in which her brother the duke is also a suspect. She only decides to tell the truth when Goyles shoots Lord Peter and then runs away after doing so. As her mother puts it, ‘Shooting people and running away is not very heroic – according to *our* standards.’²⁴ The *our* does not refer only to aristocrats, however, since Charles Parker is in the room and the dowager duchess includes him. Instead, the remark, and Lady Mary’s decisions, show that it is behavior that matters, not birth. In fact, Parker is so impressed by the way that Mary Wimsey sacrifices herself for Goyles that he falls in love with her, and they marry each other later in the series. In the end, Lady Mary Parker proclaims herself to be much happier living a middle-class life on a policeman’s salary, and the narrator says that she ‘patronized her wealthy brother with all the superiority which the worker feels over the man who merely possesses money’.²⁵ Lady Mary has the courage and honor of gentlemanliness before her marriage, but she only truly becomes a Female Gentleman after she lowers her class position.

Ngaio Marsh’s novels display more skepticism about class than Sayers’, probably because of her own colonial background, but the same motif is found in her characters. Both her sleuth, Roderick Alleyn, and his eventual wife, Agatha Troy, are of impeccable birth (one the younger brother of a baronet, the other the daughter of a landed proprietor, from whom she has inherited the estate). They are both clearly ‘county’, yet each has chosen not to live within the boundaries of that class position. Neither has remained ‘immutably themselves’, although Alleyn’s decision to become a Scotland Yard officer makes him more *déclassé* than Troy’s role as a successful painter makes her.²⁶ Marsh’s novels are populated with many middle-class female characters whose positions are equivocal or obscured by circumstance: the parson’s daughter Dinah Copeland of *Overture to Death* (1939), who becomes an actress; the New Zealander actress Martyn Tarne of *Night at the Vulcan* (originally *Opening Night*, 1951), who takes a position as dresser in a theater rather than use her blood relationship with an influential actor-manager to get ahead; and most interestingly, Roberta Grey of *Death of a Peer*

(originally *A Surfeit of Lampreys*, 1940), the daughter of New Zealand sheep farmers who meets an English marquis's niece at school, and who is annexed by the marquis's family – in turn firmly annexing them, by marrying the heir.

Heyer's mystery novels follow the same pattern. Most of their heroines are solidly upper-middle-class, but several are tainted in class position. Patricia Allison of *They Found Him Dead* (1937) is forced by poverty to work as a paid companion to an elderly lady, and tries to prevent the cousin of the house from asking her to marry him on those grounds. He, being modern, dismisses this concern breezily as 'a bit Victorian',²⁷ and this attitude pervades Heyer's other mysteries as well. Several of the young Female Gentlemen in Heyer's mysteries, like Sayers', are suspects in the murders, and most are also romantic heroines who end the novel engaged to be married. In several cases, the suspected heroine marries the very man who solved the murder: *Why Shoot a Butler?* (1933), *Death in the Stocks* (1935), and *Behold, Here's Poison* (1936) all follow this pattern. Dinah Fawcett of *The Unfinished Clue* (1934) also marries the detective, although she was never a suspect. The young suspect/heroine of *Duplicate Death* (1951) has the most unique 'taint', as she turns out to be an ex-convict who was wrongfully imprisoned for fraud and was dropped by her 'rather stuffy Warwickshire family, full of Good Form and inhibitions' as a consequence.²⁸ Her lover, a lawyer, treats her conviction bracingly. In fact, when she confesses to him rather dramatically 'Well, here it is! – I'm a gaol-bird!' his response is to laugh, 'But what a line! No, really, darling, it's terrific!'²⁹ A true gentleman recognizes a Female Gentleman despite any obscuring circumstances.

Colonial origins, sexual affairs, bohemian artistic lifestyle, gaol-bird – these are all modern taints to one's class position. Because Georgette Heyer's romance novels are all historical, her heroines are either very clearly aristocrats of impeccable birth, or else 'tainted' in far more quaint, exciting ways. During the course of her career, Heyer made her heroines more and more clearly middle-class (fewer lords and ladies, more clergymen's daughters and plain Mr and Miss). Her earlier novels, however, are often not properly Regency romances at all, being set in the eighteenth century, and the characters in them are usually titled peers. Her first romance and the one that made her a popular novelist, *These Old Shades* (1926), is set the earliest, in the 1760s. The novels then generally move forward through time as

Heyer moved through her career, with two set in the 1780s: *Devil's Cub* (1932), a sequel to *These Old Shades* focusing on the original characters' children; and *The Convenient Marriage* (1934). Two more novels are set in the 1790s: *The Talisman Ring* (1936) and *Faro's Daughter* (1941). Heyer began writing Regency novels proper with *Regency Buck* (1935), but did not focus extensively on that period until the early 1940s. The hallmark of all her earliest novels is the elevated class positions of the characters, and the swashbuckling atmosphere of the pre-French Revolution settings.³⁰ Dueling scenes are featured in all three of the earliest novels, and the depiction of the ladies and gentlemen of this era heavily emphasizes the traits associated with the older aristocratic code of honor. Even so, the heroines of the early novels are often not aristocrats; or rather, they are aristocrats who have been tainted in some way. Léonie of *These Old Shades* is thought to be a tavern-keeper's sister, then a bastard of a French count; only in the end is she revealed to be the same count's legitimate daughter, switched at birth with a peasant's son to give her father an heir. The overt Cinderella plotline of this novel is the foundation of its romantic atmosphere, and Heyer makes no bones about the way that everyone can tell Léonie is not a peasant because of her looks and manners, not just her moral qualities of honor and physical courage. Léonie's son, by contrast, falls in love in *Devil's Cub* with a woman whose father made a 'misalliance' with a bourgeois woman (no talk here of misalliances as 'snobbish nonsense'). Mary Challoner's mother is frankly vulgar and grasping, and Léonie's horrified fear of seeing her son married to a 'bourgeoise' is treated with nothing but sympathy. Mary, fortunately for all concerned, favors her father, and is one of the most outstanding examples of Female Gentlemanliness in Heyer's works, as she embodies the same virtues as Léonie, but with a more middle-class emphasis on emotional self-control. Finally, Deborah Grantham of *Faro's Daughter* is a woman of gentle birth who is forced by poverty to run a table in her aunt's gaming house. Her 'taint' is the most outré of them all, and her happy ending probably the least believable – though to her credit, Heyer forgoes the fairy-tale atmosphere in this novel for a more realistic tone of anger between the two protagonists, whose relationship reveals the violence lurking behind all Beatrice-and-Benedick-style bantering. The other heroines of this period are solidly aristocratic: earls' daughters, baronets' sisters, and the like. Not until the late

1940s did Heyer start using characters who were truly middle-class (governesses, clergyman's daughters, etc.) in her romance novels.

Interestingly, Agatha Christie's heroines span the class gamut more broadly than the other authors' do. From the lower-middle-class hairdresser Jane Grey of *Death in the Air* (1935), to the middle-class American actresses who star in *13 at Dinner* (1933), to the daughter of a French count Jacqueline de Bellefort in *Death on the Nile* (1937), Christie covers the entire spectrum. Her 1920s thrillers feature several daughters of peers such as Lady Eileen 'Bundle' Brent, but also the classically upper-middle-class Tuppence Beresford, a rural clergyman's daughter who, like Lady Mary Wimsey, came to London to do VAD work during World War I. *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1935) is written in the first-person point of view of a trained hospital nurse of no particular pretensions to gentility. This may be the most sustained attempt to incorporate a true middle-class point of view among all the Female Gentleman novels. The fact that the novel succeeds as well as it does illustrates that birth is an inessential feature of gentlemanliness for all these authors; the essential traits of courage, honor, and rationalism can be found in a woman of any origin.

Courage and the annexation of social class

Because the middlebrow novel works so hard to 'annex' class identity, it is no surprise that the Female Gentleman is rarely in possession of traditionally pure birth. But the other three traits of the Female Gentleman are all issues of character, and possession of all of them is necessary to modern gentlemanliness in these novels. The first and most basic feature of a gentlemanly character is courage. No cowardly character in any of these novels is ever given authorial approval: the narrator may condone the occasional emotional outburst or dishonorable action undertaken for love, but never a failure of courage. In the aristocratic eighteenth-century world Georgette Heyer depicted so well, physical and moral courage, expressed especially through military prowess and the art of dueling, were fundamental to the identity of a gentleman. The modification of this moral trait from a swashbuckling, hotheaded readiness to take offense at the slightest provocation, into a steady resolve in the face of mortal danger – from 'Swords at dawn' to 'The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead / ... "Play up! play up! and play the

game!'"³¹ – was a key function of English literature between Steele and Kipling. Middlebrow novelists inherited the latter definition of courage and made it even more a test of endurance rather than of explosive action, extending the idea to encompass self-reliance and independence. Still, the old definition of courage as martial prowess persists even in the most modern novels I examine, because the dueling code is intimately related to the social definition of gentlemanliness by rank.

It is easiest to see the evolution of courage as a gentlemanly virtue by beginning with Heyer's historical novels (which are set in the very period during which courage underwent its class-based transformation). The code of dueling required a gentleman to consider his honor to be extremely fragile, a thing that could be lost by the merest hint of an insult if he did not respond to the insult with adequate violence; however, only certain persons were 'challenge-able' under this code, and insults from others meant nothing.³² The idea that one's courage need only be exercised with one's equals presented an obvious problem for members of the middle class trying to co-opt the term for themselves in the eighteenth century, and Arlene Young argues that the dueling scenes in Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* are meant to undercut this notion by the expedient of making 'a gentleman of unquestionable pedigree embrace the values of the bourgeoisie' rather than by giving a bourgeois character aristocratic traits (a failed strategy tried by earlier novelists).³³ Ironically, as Young and many others have pointed out, Sir Charles Grandison can only avoid dueling without losing his honor because everyone knows he is an excellent fencer, and he is capable of disarming his opponents without hurting them; in other words, he embodies the best of both worlds, being 'a potentially swashbuckling paladin' who can 'use anti-dueling rhetoric successfully, because his words are underwritten by latent physical force'.³⁴ Almost every hero of Heyer's historical novels fits the same profile, with the exception of a few in her early eighteenth-century novels who actually participate in duels rather than avoiding them. All her later Regency heroes, who more clearly embody the middle-class nineteenth-century version of gentlemanliness, are described as being powerful men, usually excellent boxers and good shots, who rarely have to use those talents in actual violence because of their fearsome reputations.

What is far more interesting in Heyer's novels is the violence done by the heroines. Male gentlemen usually do not have to demonstrate their courage openly in her novels, but Female Gentlemen do. Her pre-Regency and early Regency novels are frequently marked by a motif I call 'girl with a gun'. At least five of Heyer's early heroines shoot, or threaten to shoot, a man, sometimes the actual villain of the piece, sometimes a person later revealed to be the hero. In addition, her first heroine, Léonie de Saint-Vire, insists on being taught to fence by her future husband, and is very ready with both sword and pistol to satisfy her hot temper and to defend herself, although she is never actually called upon to shoot anyone. The two instances in which women do shoot a man are worth examining in detail. First, in *Devil's Cub* (1932), the heroine Mary Challoner shoots Léonie's son, the Marquis of Vidal, in order to prevent him from raping her. Second, the eponymous protagonist of *The Grand Sophy* (1950) uses her gun three significant times in the novel, the final time shooting a man in the arm in order to prevent him from being hurt by someone else. This transformation of Heyer's ideal woman between 1932 and 1950 encapsulates much of the movement from eighteenth-century courage to modern endurance.

Mary Challoner of *Devil's Cub* is the product of a mixed-class marriage, whose aristocratic grandfather has had her educated at his expense, producing tension between her and her more bourgeois mother and sister. In a misguided attempt to save her sister from the rakish Vidal, Mary finds herself in France, at his mercy. She tries to convince him she is not willing to be his mistress, unlike her sister, but has no success until she threatens to shoot him, and actually pulls the trigger, wounding him slightly. This, not surprisingly, causes a complete change in his attitude toward her. Suddenly he views her as an equal rather than as a potential victim. The way the scene reads, Mary Challoner's use of violence to protect her 'virtue' is a direct analogue to the way a gentleman must be willing to use violence to protect his 'honor' – and indeed, during the eighteenth century the word 'honor' when applied to a woman usually referred to her virginity or chastity, sometimes as a direct substantive synonym for her hymen.³⁵ So far, Heyer follows the eighteenth-century aristocratic code of gentlemanliness to the letter, her only deviation being the decision to allow a woman to resort to violence in her own defense successfully. Mary Challoner is no Clarissa. Just

as might be expected, Vidal instantly responds to the use of force by seeing her as 'challenge-able', to use Donna Andrew's word: a person to be dealt with by entirely different rules. This keeps the question of honor between them entirely within aristocratic codes rather than middle-class ones.

Significantly, however, Vidal's remark on Mary's shooting is, 'I make you my compliments. I know of only one other woman who would have had the courage to pull that trigger. ... My mother.'³⁶ Vidal's mother is Léonie, the heroine of *These Old Shades*, who did not in fact ever pull the trigger in her encounters with a gun. Freudian implications aside, the comparison between Léonie and Mary emphasizes several key points. First, in Vidal's eyes the trait represented by shooting him is courage, and this is apparently the most important differentiating factor between women he respects and those he does not. Second, he considers courage to be so rare in a woman that he never expects to see it; the narrator has emphasized how world-weary he is, and how he will never marry unless he can find a woman worthy of him (read: like his mother). This fits well with Nicola Humble's description of the 'notional feminist politics' of middlebrow novels, which admire courage, honor, and rationality in women, but treat it as very rare.³⁷ Gentlemanliness is the ideal to aspire to, but not commonly achieved. Finally, it is worth noting that in almost every other way besides their courage, Mary and Léonie are very different from each other, particularly in their emotional control. Léonie is depicted throughout her novel as hotheaded, impetuous, and romantic, whereas Mary is cool, controlled, rational, and sensible at all times. This difference between them reflects an evolution in Heyer's notions of ideal female behavior.

By 1950, Heyer had entirely dropped the swashbuckling, romantic atmosphere of her early romances, and had settled into the tone of light comedy for which she is so popular today. Her Regency-period romances are almost exclusively populated by relatively normal people who may find themselves in farcical situations, but very rarely violent ones. The latent potential for violence underlies many of her plot points, however, and it remains important that both her heroes and heroines be able to take care of themselves in any situation. No heroine demonstrates this better than Sophy Stanton-Lacy of *The Grand Sophy*. She is depicted consistently as a strong-willed, managing person, who plots and schemes benevolently to fix the problems

of everyone around her. Having been raised by a diplomat father in the wilds of Napoleonic Europe, she is an intrepid horsewoman and afraid of nothing. Most importantly, she owns a gun and knows how to use it. She brings it out three times. First, she uses it to defend herself when she descends into a London slum to extract a promissory note and pledged ring from an unscrupulous moneylender for her young cousin Hubert. She is as cool and collected during this mission as Mary Challoner, treating the villainous moneylender with good-humored contempt, even when he threatens to kidnap her and hold her for ransom. Second, she brings it out when her cousin Charles (the hero of the novel, whose relationship with her embodies rivalry rather than sweet romance) expresses disbelief that she could really have used a pistol with the moneylender. He challenges her to a contest of marksmanship. Finally, Sophy uses her gun to inflict a light wound on Lord Charlbury, her cousin Cecilia's suitor with whom she pretends to elope in order to provoke both Cecilia and Charles to jealousy – entirely for their own good, of course. Her reason for shooting him is to protect him from Charles' wrath. Charles is known to be an excellent boxer, and she thinks it unfair that Charlbury should get a bloody nose for having helped with her plan. As he points out to her himself, this does not argue a high opinion of his own courage, but Sophy counters that if Cecilia is to be brought to the proper attitude toward him, he needs a romantic wound like an arm in a sling, not something off-putting like a black eye.³⁸ With this he has to be content.

This final incident is the last time a gun appears in a Heyer romance, and acts as a sort of farewell to the motif, a comical tour de force that strips the gun of all its symbolic power by making it nothing but the instrument of comedy. Sophy uses her own violence not to defend her honor or to cause harm, but to prevent two men from fighting each other in the accepted aristocratic way. Mary Challoner prevents Vidal from killing a man in a duel as well, but only by rushing between their swords herself and suffering a wound.³⁹ Sophy is never blooded or symbolically deflowered in this way, remaining in complete control of the situation and her equally formidable and impetuous lover at all times. In the eighteenth-century novels, the violence is real and therefore the characters must react to it with real honor and real courage. In the Regency novels, the violence is always contained and comical, so that a character like Sophy will never face

a challenge she cannot overcome. Perhaps Heyer stacks the deck in order to make aristocratic notions of honor seem outdated, but it is effective. After Sophy has shot a man to prevent him from being hurt in a duel, how can dueling be taken seriously? Sophy's own brand of courage is 'resolution' rather than martial prowess. When she first conceives of her plan to shoot Charlbury, she says to the person who inspires it, 'Resolution is all that is needed! ... One should never shrink from the performance of unpleasant tasks to obtain a laudable object, after all!'⁴⁰ This sentiment is positively Victorian, though of course the behavior she justifies with it is anything but Victorian – and that is Heyer's ultimate irony. She clearly depicts the death of the aristocratic code, without endorsing the Victorian moralism that followed it, except ironically. What remains is a modern version of gentlemanliness, which women are more suited to display than men.

In *No Man's Land*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss at some length a motif they find in men's writing of the early postmodernist period (1940s–1970s), which they dub 'penis as pistol'.⁴¹ Writers like Henry Miller and Norman Mailer reconceived sexuality as an explicit weapon, a 'battering ram' that could bring independent women back into submission.⁴² Their examples are compelling, and I do not dispute their analysis of what such masculinist writers were trying to do. But Heyer's use of the pistol as a motif of her own, in novels of roughly the same period, exposes the flaw in this method of symbolizing sexual difference. The idea that the penis is a weapon is hardly unique to early postmodernism. The penis was a sword long before it was a gun. A sword, however, requires both extensive training and brute strength to be used effectively. It is a much more suitable symbol of 'masculine' power than a gun, because technology is the great equalizer. A woman can use a gun as easily as a man, and there is no inherent need for it to be a masculine symbol. Sophy Stanton-Lacy is an excellent shot who knows how to load her own pistol, but such training is not absolutely necessary; Mary Challoner has taken the pistol from Vidal's coach, admits to him that she has no idea whether it is even loaded, and aims very poorly indeed. The fact that the men are only lightly wounded means that Heyer's girls with guns do not follow the pattern of female high modernist writers either, whose fiction is filled with characters like Clarissa Dalloway 'who feel inexplicably empowered by male deaths'.⁴³ Gilbert and Gubar depict as

reciprocal the violence of the battle of the sexes that is constitutive of literary modernism. Heyer's comic treatment in both novels disrupts the clichéd connection between violence and success on both sides of the divide. Interestingly, relatively few of Heyer's mystery novels employ a gun as murder weapon, and the same is true of the other Golden Age novelists. Poison and knives are more common in all the writers' works, and although many characters repeat the cliché that 'poison is a woman's weapon', the poisoners are actually just as likely to be men.

In mystery novels, the modern redefinition of courage takes two directions. For Sayers and Marsh, the equation of courage with 'resolve' rather than with overt physical violence becomes more prominent than it is in romances. Women's courage is shown generally through self-reliance or independence, which need not be physical. However, Christie and Allingham frequently resort to heroines who can best be described as 'intrepid', essentially exactly like female versions of male Regency heroes. They are often truly aristocratic rather than middle-class or marginal, and act exactly as their own brothers might – just like Sophy Stanton-Lacy, who has been raised by her father as if she were a boy. Such heroines are most commonly found in 1920s thrillers rather than in the clue-puzzle mysteries more common in the 1930s. Their boyish 'flapper' features link them to the androgyny favored by Virginia Woolf and by critics who read gender through the lens of performativity, and for that reason they have come in for a certain amount of recent critical attention and approbation.

A number of Agatha Christie's early novels contain such flapper heroines. The most sustained of these is Tuppence (Prudence Beresford, née Cowley), of the Tommy and Tuppence novels; she debuts in *The Secret Adversary* (1922). Tuppence is the daughter of an Archdeacon, a former VAD who, after being demobbed, scrimps a living in London rather than going home to a father who 'has that delightful early Victorian view that short skirts and smoking are immoral'.⁴⁴ She forms a 'joint venture' with her childhood friend Tommy Beresford; they call this venture 'Young Adventurers, Ltd' and write a classified advertisement: 'Two young adventurers for hire. Willing to do anything, go anywhere. Pay must be good. No unreasonable offer refused.'⁴⁵ Before they can even place the ad they are pitchforked into an espionage drama featuring undercover

missions (Tuppence becomes a house-parlormaid for several days), car chases, train journeys, and gun battles. Tuppence takes her part in these adventures with great physical courage, and as their henchman Albert puts it in the 1929 sequel, she is 'just like one of those rubber bones you buy for little dorgs – guaranteed indestructible'.⁴⁶ Throughout her early adventures she remains insouciant and 'not sentimental', and her 'gamin element' gives her an affinity for young boys, whom she is clearly meant to resemble.⁴⁷

The 'gamin element' of adventurous young women is a frequent motif in all fiction of the 1920s. In her study of Agatha Christie's gender politics, Merja Makinen discusses the history of the 1920s boyish heroine, using the word 'comradely',⁴⁸ a word that also frequently recurs in Nicola Humble's *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*. Gill Plain also discusses this 'asexual' character type in her study of sexuality in twentieth-century crime fiction, calling it 'the boy-girl, the antithesis of traditional female sexuality'.⁴⁹ While 'boy-girl' neatly captures the androgyny of the figure, it is not really an asexual androgyny, in the sense that all the boy-girls (Tuppence, Dulcie Duveen, Bundle Brent, Léonie de Saint-Vire, Allingham's Amanda Fitton, Marsh's Angela North) are ultimately paired in satisfying, though often unconventional, heterosexual relationships. This image was not by any means confined to detective fiction, nor is it the only type of Female Gentleman I will examine. Christie's use of this highly iconic character type, however, makes Tuppence more distinctively 'period' than other Female Gentlemen. The gamin element is either very attractive, or very irritating – which perhaps explains the almost schizophrenic, 'love her or hate her' split in criticism of the Tommy and Tuppence novels.⁵⁰

Tuppence insists on taking the 'joint' nature of their venture seriously. When Tommy tells the government agent who gives them an unofficial commission that he will take good care of her, she replies 'And I'll look after *you*.'⁵¹ When they are young married partners in amateur detection, he sometimes tries to protect her despite herself, but by middle age he takes the jointness of their venture as seriously as Tuppence does. In *N or M?* (1941), Tommy is commissioned to hunt Fifth Columnists at the beginning of World War II. The secret service agent intends Tuppence to have no share in it, but she cleverly finds out the plan and establishes herself separately in the same boardinghouse Tommy is investigating. They accept her as part of

the team, but the agent asks if Tommy will try to keep her out of it anyway, because of the danger. He replies:

'I don't know that I really would want to do that ... Tuppence and I, you see, aren't on those terms. We go into things – together!'

In his mind was that phrase, uttered years ago, at the close of an earlier war. A *joint venture*. ...

That was what his life with Tuppence had been and would always be – a Joint Venture.⁵²

By 1941 even Agatha Christie, not the most radical of the authors I am discussing, could see the possibility of married partnership being truly equal. This partnership develops over several decades, and like that of Harriet Vane and Peter Wimsey, is extremely modern. Tuppence takes time out of adventuring to have children, but Tommy does not adventure without her. They achieve the goals that New Woman Mona Caird, whom I discussed in Chapter 2, thought impossible. Unfortunately, Christie was all too willing to admit that this success was a fantasy. Tuppence is 'one in a thousand!', and the other 999 women cannot hope to achieve her balance of career and family.⁵³

While Tuppence Beresford is the most gentlemanly of Christie's heroines, there are other intrepid and adventurous women in her early novels, and those of several other novelists as well. The 1920s archetype of the Bright Young Thing is frequently embodied in middlebrow novels as an aristocratic woman who drives fast, smokes hard, and meets physical danger with insouciance. Christie's *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925) has two such women, both daughters of peers: the Hon. Virginia Revel, the main heroine, and Lady Eileen 'Bundle' Brent, who is a supporting character in this novel but returns later as the protagonist in *The Seven Dials Mystery* (1929). Virginia Revel displays sangfroid even when finding a dead body in her house, planted there to frame her, which leads the hero to admire her 'courage and brains'.⁵⁴ Later in the novel, she takes a leap of faith in trusting the hero when everyone else believes him to be a criminal, and when she responds to his call to come to him, she does so 'with a little gallant toss of the head, the same toss of the head [with] which her ancestors had gone into action in the Crusades'.⁵⁵ Bundle Brent drives her own car recklessly fast, is 'cool, efficient, and logical',⁵⁶ and is fairly

successful at amateur detective work through willingness to make plans and disregard her own danger. She penetrates the meeting of a secret society in *The Seven Dials Mystery* by staying hidden in a closet for hours, and as her future husband Bill Eversleigh puts it, 'there's nothing she'd stick at – absolutely nothing!'⁵⁷ Ngaio Marsh's first several Alleyn mysteries feature a similar character, Angela North, whose driving in the first chapter of *A Man Lay Dead* (1934) is so terrifying that the other characters in the house party claim that Nigel Bathgate (eventually to become Alleyn's Watson) had to be a 'Pukka Sahib' to endure the experience of 'gaz[ing] upon stark death' on the trip up from the railroad station.⁵⁸ Alleyn uses Nigel and Angela to do some undercover work for him early in the series, in scenes that strongly recall the Tommy and Tuppence novels, although since Marsh only began writing in the 1930s, there is a sense of belatedness about it when Alleyn calls them 'Bright Young People' in Marsh's third novel, *The Nursing Home Murder* (1935).⁵⁹

Neither Christie nor Marsh makes these young women the main detective, and all of the 'gamin' characters, aside from Tuppence, are ultimately recontained. Bundle, disappointingly, turns out not to be the best judge of character, believing entirely that the secret society she is investigating is a criminal enterprise when all along it is a sort of amateur espionage ring gotten up by the real detective, Superintendent Battle. She is prevented by Battle from being in the thick of most of the action scenes, and retreats to a more passive position after being almost killed by the real criminals at the end of the novel. Though she is initiated into the refreshingly mixed-gender Seven Dials Society at the end of the novel, her success is slightly tarnished by her earlier lapses. Angela North, similarly, is limited to accessory roles in scenes carefully managed by Alleyn to limit the danger she would experience (for example, in the first novel, Angela is left at a restaurant to wait and make a phone call if the others fail to return in time, whereas Nigel infiltrates the Russian gang and is tortured by having pins run up under his fingernails). Both Nigel and Angela dwindled in prominence as the series continued, but Angela is ushered off the stage by Marsh considerably sooner than Nigel is. After they marry, Nigel continues making appearances, but Angela fades away into pregnancy and is seen no more. The Bright Young heroines of the flapper era are only partial gentlemen at best.

Christie's early novels also provide a less aristocratic set of women who are both physically courageous and successful gentlemen, all of them American actresses living in England. Babe St Maur is another member of the Seven Dials Society and does undercover work. As Bill Eversleigh describes her, she's 'pretty smart. And she's got muscles.'⁶⁰ She successfully impersonates a Hungarian countess and is ready for action in one of the book's key action scenes – although the narrative forces her to take as passive a role as Bundle, hiding in a corner and pretending to faint. Also, while we are meant to see her as Bundle's rival for Bill's affections, the casual anti-Semitism of the 1920s assures us that this will not be the case, as Bill mentions in the same breath as her brains and her muscles that her real name is 'Goldschmidt or Abrameier – something quite impossible'.⁶¹ Her unrefined accent and slang speech when she speaks in her own voice rather than the countess's are also meant to make it clear to a contemporary reader that she is not a real rival to Bundle. She represents one of the clearest indications of the class-bound limitations of the 'gentleman' concept.

Christie had, earlier, seemed to break free of such limitations in the figure of Dulcie Duveen of *The Murder on the Links* (1923). Dulcie is another American actress, an acrobat with wrists 'just like steel',⁶² who climbs into a locked room through a window and physically subdues a murderer because of her acrobatic skills and strength. She is an excellent embodiment of the 'hard-mouthed, cigarette-smoking females' whom I began this chapter describing. Like Captain George Fentiman, the young man who utters this phrase in Sayers' *Bellona Club*, Captain Arthur Hastings, the narrator of *Murder on the Links*, disapproves of such women: 'Now I am old-fashioned. A woman, I consider, should be womanly. I have no patience with the modern neurotic girl who jazes from morning to night, smokes like a chimney, and uses language which would make a Billingsgate fishwoman blush!'⁶³ Given how consistently Christie uses Hastings as a comic butt of dramatic irony, who is proven wrong in order to be a foil for both Hercule Poirot and the somewhat more perceptive reader, it will be no surprise to learn that Hastings ends the novel kissing Dulcie.⁶⁴ Even though for much of the novel she seems to be the murderer, her opening scene with Hastings had established her as a good character, so that the reader faithfully awaits the twist to find out who really did it. Perhaps her best line in this opening

scene is her rejoinder when Hastings criticizes her for using too much makeup:

'It isn't as though you weren't so pretty that you can afford to do without it,' I said stammeringly.

'My dear boy! I've got to do it. All the girls do. Think I want to look like a little frump up from the country?' She took one last look in the mirror, smiled approval, and put it and her vanity-box away in her bag. 'That's better. Keeping up appearances is a bit of a fag, I grant, but if a girl respects herself it's up to her not to let herself get slack.'

To this essentially moral sentiment, I had no reply. A point of view makes a great difference.⁶⁵

Hastings' last comment here can be taken as an encapsulation of an entire theory of fiction, of course, and especially of Christie's use of him as a narrative device. The reader always maintains a somewhat separated point of view from Hastings, because his inadequacy to judge a situation is always apparent. Thus the irony of the Poirot/Hastings novels is almost always dramatic irony, in which the reader feels akin to the great detective because of their mutual superiority over the narrator. Alison Light comments that Hastings, unlike Holmes' Watson, is a 'representative of the pre-war world', whose comic inadequacy is meant as a 'debunking' of his attitudes.⁶⁶ Here we see that his disapproval acts ironically to recommend Dulcie to a skeptical reader. Who could continue to disapprove of lipstick and cigarettes after her masterful refutation?

Dulcie is one of the most overtly feminist characters in any Christie novel. As Gill Plain notes, the climax of the novel, in which Dulcie saves the day, is like a battle between feminine stereotypes: the matriarch is attacked by the 'deadly seductress', and is saved by the 'asexual, boyish flapper', while Poirot and Hastings are locked outside.⁶⁷ The strong contrast between this ending and the earlier scene in which Dulcie had pretended to faint at the sight of a corpse provides a clear feminist argument. As Plain puts it, Hastings' satisfaction at Dulcie's supposed weakness reveals 'a powerful postwar urge to see women restored to their proper place in the order of society. They should be caring, not callous, they should not think, and unlike the nurses of the First World War, they should very properly

fall down at the sight of the prostrate male.⁶⁸ Christie's early novels continuously disrupt this assumption. In this 1923 novel and in the 1922 *The Secret Adversary*, Dulcie and Tuppence assume the prostrate position only to lull a stereotypical thinker into a false sense of security, in order to achieve their own ends: Dulcie wants to steal a piece of evidence, Tuppence wants to avoid being killed by a criminal. The artificiality of the mask and the ease with which they assume it undermines any idea that fainting is natural to women. But it is also worth noting that neither Dulcie nor Tuppence is truly callous, and neither is any other admirable character of either sex in Christie's work. 'Caring' is simply redefined by Christie to be not incompatible with 'courageous'.

Another intrepid heroine is Margery Allingham's Lady Amanda Fitton, to whom we are introduced in *The Fear Sign* (originally published as *Sweet Danger*). This 1933 novel revolves around a plot to regain the rightful inheritance of Amanda's family, by finding romantically hidden objects that prove their claim. She is a classic example of the 'comradely' female discussed by Nicola Humble, and also of Gill Plain's 'boy-girl' flapper stereotype. In fact, in this first novel, she is the most sexless of all the major characters I will discuss, as she is only 17, and frequently wears boys' clothing; even her best dress is 'cut severely' and reveals her figure to be 'slender almost to skinniness', while her look is described as 'the inquisitive, but polite, regard of a child'.⁶⁹ Amanda wears boys' clothing so that she can better do her work of running a mill for the purpose of recharging the villagers' wireless batteries with the dynamo she has installed herself; the income from this endeavor helps support her poverty-stricken family. She builds radio equipment and installs an electric motor into an ancient brougham. The narrator describes her as having 'pep', and indeed she is an extremely energetic character, the dynamo of the plot.⁷⁰ Campion is attracted to her instantly, and makes her his 'lieut.' She saves his life by staying behind after her family has escaped to safety, and even takes a bullet to save the iron box containing the last proof of her brother's earldom. Because of her youth, Campion essentially leaves her with the implied promise of their future relationship unfulfilled; but significantly, it is she who takes the initiative to ask him to consider her 'as a partner in the business later on', when she is older, to which he agrees with 'sudden eagerness'.⁷¹ His eagerness clearly stems in part from physical attraction to the way she looks in

old clothes that are so shrunken they 'clung to her like a skin'.⁷² Even at 17, this 'boy-girl' is not really sexless. Campion is attracted to her because she is a woman who is also a gentleman like himself, and that combination of fully female identity with previously 'masculine' qualities is the key to the character type in all the novels.

While Christie's and Allingham's Female Gentlemen are more traditional action heroines, not unlike Heyer's Regency-era characters, Sayers and Marsh prefer to take Sophy Stanton-Lacy's watchword 'resolution' in a different direction, turning it into endurance rather than outward action, an unwillingness to ask for help no matter how desperate the situation. This form of courage might be thought of as more inherently 'modern', rejecting the unthinking derring-do that led so many aristocratic young men to their deaths in World War I, and also more inherently middlebrow, rejecting the association between swashbuckling courage and aristocratic birth. Earlier novels often use the term 'sport' or 'sporting' to refer to a woman who is courageous in the typically masculine way; undoubtedly, Bundle Brent, who would 'stick at nothing', is a sport. Dorothy Sayers, by contrast, puts a devastating denunciation of 'being a sport' in Harriet Vane's mouth during *Gaudy Night*, arguing that neither young women nor young men should be sporting, but should be gentlemen instead.⁷³ But in the World War II novel *Pearls Before Swine* (originally published as *Coroner's Pidgin*, 1945), Margery Allingham values a young woman who is 'game', refusing to impose her tears on a dinner companion, and calls her 'nicely brought up'.⁷⁴ Georgette Heyer refers to facing hardship without complaint as 'gay courage' in a late romance novel,⁷⁵ and it is one of the most consistently valued traits in female characters of all novels of the interwar period.

Earning one's own living is a major way to demonstrate self-reliance for all the authors. 'Tuppence' Beresford, Amanda Fitton, Harriet Vane, Agatha Troy, and many minor female characters in the novels of Sayers and Marsh are financially independent due to their own talents. In fact, this is almost a litmus test for whether or not a female character is to be viewed as sympathetic or not in their novels. With very few exceptions (the most notable being the murderers in Sayers' *Unnatural Death* and Heyer's *Death in the Stocks*), women who live on their own earned income rather than on inheritances or their husbands are positive characters of whom the authors approve. Some are confirmed spinsters, like Sayers' Miss Climpson, while others are

young ladies who refuse to follow the conventions and stay at home until a suitor carries them off, like Ngaio Marsh's Dinah Copeland, a rector's daughter who has become an actress. These particular women are both traditional in their values and plot outcomes, Miss Climpson being a Victorian relic and Dinah Copeland ultimately becoming engaged to the squire's son. But each faces difficulties without relying solely on a man, and in fact it seems that Dinah, like Tuppence Beresford, will keep her career after her marriage, based on a cameo appearance she makes in a later novel.⁷⁶

Miss Climpson is the purest exemplar of 'resolution' as a form of endurance, since it is her tenacity in maintaining that she cannot vote for conviction that saves Harriet Vane from being hanged at the beginning of *Strong Poison*. Even though the rest of the jury originally believes Harriet guilty, Miss Climpson converts enough of them to cause a mistrial, through her unwavering resolution and her stated ability to endure long hours and fasting due to her religious training. Or, as Lord Peter describes it to defending counsel, 'Fortunately, she is a tough, thin, elderly woman with a sound digestion and a militant High-Church conscience of remarkable staying-power' who converts one woman on the jury because the foreman 'tried to bear her down by his male authority'.⁷⁷ Miss Climpson's own resolution in the face of hardship inspires an ally, and Harriet is reprieved.

Ngaio Marsh takes the same theme of endurance of privation, without any comical touches, in her 1951 novel *Opening Night* (known in America as *Night at the Vulcan*). In this novel, the protagonist is a young woman, Martyn Tarne, who has emigrated from New Zealand to be an actress in London, but has had all her money stolen on the ship. Rather than ask for help from her famous actor cousin, she tries to get a job at every theater in London before his, and then only takes a job in his theater when she is literally starving. Her immediate physical sensations and her despair are described in minute detail throughout the first section of the novel, which is focalized through her point of view. The focus is so tight on the immediate present that the reader does not know of Martyn's relationship with the famous actor until it is revealed to other characters midway through the novel. But her ability to remain an excellent actress even through the ordeal of being forced to act as a dresser (essentially, a servant) has a certain fairy-tale quality to it that echoes the romantic story of Léonie de Saint-Vire, or any other Cinderella. This Cinderella,

however, smokes and treads the stage, and has a suitably happy ending married to the famous cousin – as much a coup for the colonial actress as Roberta Grey's 'bagging' of Henry Lamprey in Marsh's *Surfeit of Lampreys*. Resolution is rewarded by all these authors.

One writer who problematizes the association of courage with gentlemanliness is Agatha Christie. Her novels are filled with women who are courageous but not honorable. Many of them are of the same type as Cremorna Garden, the Victorian actress/courtesan of Sayers' *Strong Poison* (see Chapter 2). Career women who support themselves with resolution in the face of oppressive social standards are quite common in Christie's works. But frequently such women are depicted as hardened by their lives, and overly preoccupied with money in a way that makes them vulnerable to temptation. Babe St Maur and Dulcie Duveen are American actresses in novels of the 1920s who do not give up their honor; but in the 1930s Christie seems to have become more cynical. Carlotta Adams, the gifted American actress who uses her mimic abilities to provide the murderer with an alibi in *13 at Dinner* (originally published as *Lord Edgware Dies* in 1933) and is subsequently murdered herself to keep her from talking, is a perfect Female Gentleman in every way, except her love of money. 'Nothing really ever excited Carlotta except money. She was made that way. She'd got one of the best heads for business I'd ever met,'⁷⁸ says her best friend – but her head for business did not prevent her from noticing that the deal she was offered was too good to be true, because her sheer desire for money got in the way. Madame Giselle of *Death in the Air* (originally published as *Death in the Clouds* in 1935) is a Parisian moneylender who uses blackmail to ensure that her clients pay up. She is described as 'perfectly ruthless and deaf to any finer shades of feeling' but at the same time 'scrupulously honest. She kept faith with those who kept faith with her' – that is, she never used her blackmail information against a client who paid her on time, and left instructions with her maid to destroy all the files after her death so that no one else could use them either. 'She was ruthless, but she was also a woman of her word.'⁷⁹ Like Cremorna Garden, she gave good value but was totally unsentimental.

Both Carlotta and Madame Giselle are murder victims rather than main characters. Christie's most troubling courageous woman is another 'girl with a gun', the murderous protagonist Jacqueline de Bellefort of *Death on the Nile* (1937). She illustrates why courage is

not by itself a sufficient condition for gentlemanliness. The two main characters of this novel are both women, each of whom is a failed Female Gentleman; one kills the other. Linnet Ridgeway is a wealthy, self-possessed woman with a keen grasp of business, who is kind to her friends, but with one fatal flaw: she falls in love with Jackie's fiancé and lacks the honorable self-control to stop herself from taking Simon away from her friend. Jackie is courageous and also honorable – she has the gallant, 'gay' courage so prized in this period and which goes along with the schoolboy ethos of 'playing the game'. She and Simon Doyle plot to kill Linnet after Simon marries her, using their own feigned falling out to provide each other with alibis. This plan requires Jackie to fake shooting Simon in front of witnesses so that he can kill Linnet while everyone thinks him disabled. When their plan goes wrong, she later has to murder a maid with a scalpel, and an older woman with a gun. Both this third murder and her initial shot at Simon (which has to look real but actually miss him) require her to be an excellent shot with a cool head under time pressure. While Simon is the one who initially desires to kill Linnet for money, everyone agrees that he could never have thought of such a complex plan; Jackie creates the entire scheme with her 'cool, resourceful, planning brain'.⁸⁰ She is both mentally and morally superior to her lover. When she is found out, she tells Poirot that Simon is 'a bad loser'. Poirot responds that *she* is a good loser, and 'She laughed suddenly – a queer, gay, defiant little laugh' in agreement.⁸¹

In order to save Simon from the pain and fear of trial and execution, Jackie kills him and then herself at the end of the novel, again with a pistol, in a scene which requires again that she act quickly and take her shots unhesitatingly. After shooting Simon, and as she is about to be captured again, 'she turned the little glittering toy against her heart and pressed the trigger'.⁸² The imagery here highlights the irony of the novel: all the victims except Simon Doyle are women who bring their deaths upon themselves through their 'feminine' weaknesses. Both Linnet and Jackie are victims of an inability to control their desire for a man. They allow emotion to overwhelm their good sense and their honor. The maid that Jackie kills is a blackmailer, whose fatal flaw is greed; the older woman is an alcoholic and has-been hack writer (perhaps a portrait of Christie's fears for herself in old age) who brings about her death through

her desire to gain attention. The murder weapons are small, shiny objects – a tiny pistol, a surgical scalpel – ‘little glittering toys’ as feminine as the characters’ weaknesses. Jackie even chooses to shoot herself in the heart instead of the head, emphasizing the fatal role of emotion in her ruin.

Death on the Nile, like many of Christie’s novels, is a relentless exposition of the darker side of gentlemanly virtues – Jackie is a crack shot with a cool head, Linnet is good at business, Simon is good at games and ‘things a man ought to be keen about’.⁸³ Like the greedy Carlotta Adams or the dispassionately ruthless Madame Giselle, they are all done in by their inability to be honorable in one key area of life – a single failure that dooms them. This pessimistic view accords with the general tone of middlebrow fiction, in which the honorable hero and heroine are rare exceptions in a sea of lesser characters. Christie’s most explicit and devastating critique of the value of courage comes in *N or M?*, when the Nazi Fifth Columnist attempts to recruit Tuppence by praising her ‘brains and breeding and courage’, the qualities that the Nazis will need to remake ‘a new Britain’ ruled over by ‘the best *type* of Englishmen’.⁸⁴ The secret agent says later that the key of the Nazi appeal to English traitors is this play upon their desire to use their fine qualities for ‘*personal glory*’ and ‘pride in what they, *they themselves*, were going to achieve for that country’.⁸⁵ That is, the individualism inherent in the gentlemanly code – ‘breeding and courage’ – is portrayed by Christie as a politically dangerous force. In the 1930s, Dorothy L. Sayers had seen individualism as a bulwark against fascism and communism (which I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 4), but it is possible that if she had continued writing novels into the 1940s she would have altered her treatment of the concepts to align with Christie’s. For these novelists, and for the age that produced them, courage was a necessary but not sufficient condition for gentlemanliness; courage is nothing without honor, the next trait of the Female Gentleman that I will discuss.

The honor of the mind

In the old aristocratic code, courage and honor were inextricably connected. As we have already seen, ‘honor’ was viewed as a fundamentally physical trait in many ways for both men and women. Even a cursory perusal of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature

reveals how completely a woman's 'honor' was identified with her sexual chastity. A man's honor was similarly dependent on physical wholeness or intactness. As David Castronovo points out, the fact that anyone of similar status could imperil a man's honor by the slightest insult made a man's honor curiously vulnerable,⁸⁶ as much so as a woman's. While the actual content of male and female honor may have been seen as radically different, they were parallel in these two important senses, physicality and fragility. The transformation of gentlemanliness into a moral state in the nineteenth century required 'honor' to be detached from its primarily physical meaning (whether sexual or martial), and redefined as a state of virtue. That state remained extremely sensitive and fragile, however. What made a Victorian man a gentleman was as much his sense of values as his birth or courage.

Because domestic ideology is predicated on an essentialist philosophy of difference between the sexes, men and women of the nineteenth century often felt each other to be aliens because their values remained fundamentally different. In large part this split in values proceeded from the gendered division between reason and emotion, as I shall discuss in the final section of this chapter. But Victorian men often felt that women literally could not possess or even understand honor, and that this was the major difference between the sexes. Middlebrow novelists, however, set out to prove that honor should be the same for men and women, and that the specific set of values which ought to comprise honor were those of gentlemanliness. Thus the novels are filled with relationships in which the man loves the woman because she is the only one he has ever found who truly understands his values. All the authors give the impression that women of honor – Female Gentlemen – are rare, and that is why men are so relieved to find them as partners. While middlebrow novels are more critical of the female sex as a whole, it is often a constructive criticism, as the rare women are held up as models for others, and the implication is that they will produce a more honorable next generation through motherhood or education. Middlebrow novels also depict honor as being rare among men, so if there is pessimism it is about human society as a whole. The hero and heroine sometimes seem like islands of wisdom in a sea of fools, cowards, and comic foils. Since such an effect is almost always played for comedy, it does not make the novels themselves

seem pessimistic, although the portraits of flawed characters are sometimes so savage in Heyer's contemporary mystery novels that they teeter on that edge. Her romance novels, insulated from reality by a layer of historical displacement, remain sunnily comic no matter how dull or despicable the secondary characters are, perhaps explaining why she confined herself to that genre later in her career.

The specific form of honorable values in the novels of this period echoes a particular Victorian dichotomy, that between acting out of personal considerations (relationships, emotion), and acting out of principle (abstract, rational, general). That women could do only the former and men ought to do only the latter was viewed as the chief difference between the sexes. One representative view is found in *Aurora Leigh* (1857), in which Elizabeth Barrett Browning has Romney Leigh exclaim, standing in for a whole strand of cultural thought, that women cannot comprehend any misery in the abstract, but only 'weep for what you know'; women can weep for a single child who is sick, but not a million sick children, because they are 'mere women, personal and passionate'.⁸⁷ The comment of the old lawyer in *The Moonstone*, that 'women, as you may have observed, have no principles',⁸⁸ also sums up the Victorian attitude. A primary goal of late Victorian feminism was to refute this idea that women could not act on general principle rather than personal emotion. As Gail Cunningham puts it, 'a woman was only genuinely New if her conflict with social convention was on *a matter of principle*'.⁸⁹ That valuation of general principles over personal attachments or preferences carried through into the Female Gentleman novels written by the New Women's daughters.

Agatha Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), features Miss Evelyn Howard, a middle-aged woman of mannish appearance and voice, whom Poirot calls 'an excellent specimen of well-balanced English beef and brawn. She is sanity itself.'⁹⁰ Miss Howard refuses at first to help them find the criminal when she believes it may be someone in the household, but Poirot changes her mind by appealing to her principles, and:

'Yes,' she said quietly, 'that was not Evelyn Howard who spoke!' She flung her head up proudly. '*This* is Evelyn Howard! And she is on the side of Justice! Let the cost be what it may.' And with these words, she walked firmly out of the room.

‘There,’ said Poirot, looking after her, ‘goes a very valuable ally. That woman, Hastings, has got brains as well as a heart.’⁹¹

Given her age and the date of the novel, Evelyn Howard is undoubtedly a New Woman, and so her appearance would seem to be an auspicious beginning for the Female Gentleman, a handing off of the baton of principled honor to the next generation. Unfortunately, principled Evelyn Howard turns out to be the accomplice of the murderer, and the brains of the operation as well. Plot twists of this sort are common in Christie’s work. Women who seem admirable often turn out in the very end to have been morally damaged, even criminal; other examples range from Lorraine Wade, the innocent young blonde with the ‘strength of purpose’ in a ‘small, resolute jaw’,⁹² who colludes in several murders in *The Seven Dials Mystery*, to Jacqueline de Bellefort of *Death on the Nile*. To be fair, the last-minute revelation that a seemingly innocent point-of-view character has been the criminal all along is one of Christie’s most notorious devices, and she pulls the same trick with male characters as well. Christie was fond of creating and then violating readerly trust in a character type that seemed irreproachable, and this is one of the features of her writing that has led many critics to deem her conservative in her politics. If criminality lurks in the hearts of quiet villages and pretty blonde girls, then society needs to take a heavy hand in repressing it, goes their reasoning. But one could just as easily see her reliance on bait-and-switch characterization as Christie’s critique of the muddled thinking that relies on stereotypes in judging character.

In Christie’s novels, the principles of the Female Gentleman are acknowledged by most characters to be the goal to which both men and women should aspire – she is simply cynical about how likely they are to do so. In that sense, she breaks with New Woman novels; virtue is the same for both men and women, and tragically flawed characters have tragic endings because of their flaws, not because circumstance or society in general have oppressed them. That is the fundamental difference between New Woman fiction and interwar middlebrow novels overall. The other detective novels I examine here are more likely to provide optimistic endings, with characters who espouse the same principles as Christie’s, but are better at living up to them, and this optimism represents an even further evolution from New Woman patterns. The word principle occurs frequently in

Sayers' late Harriet Vane novels, as she tries to work out exactly what an honorable woman of the 1930s would be. The entire plot of *Gaudy Night* is a lengthy and occasionally tortured essay on the nature of 'principles', and how far they must trump personal needs. Margery Allingham provides an almost equally tortured essay on gentlemanliness for her male detective Albert Campion in *Dancers in Mourning* (1937). Heyer and Marsh treat the issue somewhat more lightly. With a few exceptions, neither their heroes nor their heroines agonize over their honor, although they generally live out the same values.

The most consistent and thoroughly argued statement of the nature of gentlemanly principles is Sayers' *Gaudy Night* (1936). Indeed, the conflict between intellectual integrity and emotional or personal relationships is the main theme of the book. The plot turns on a poison-pen letter writer who terrorizes a fictional female college at Oxford. The criminal is revealed to be a servant whose husband had committed suicide after his career was destroyed for research misconduct – or, as we would put it today, he violated the academic *honor* code. Because a Fellow of Shrewsbury College, Harriet's alma mater, discovered and pursued the misconduct, the widowed Annie has an abiding desire for vengeance against female academics in general, and that Fellow in particular. She pursues her vengeance by writing anonymous letters and playing pranks, often with grotesquely sexual overtones; she drives one unstable student to the brink of suicide. The female faculty and staff are consumed with fear that the criminal might be one of themselves, based on stereotypes about celibate women and madness. Harriet struggles throughout the novel to avoid drawing this conclusion herself, and is gloomy about the possibility of men and women ever meeting as intellectual equals because of it. Lord Peter, however, is unshaken, having taken it for granted throughout that the women intellectuals of the college would put honor above personal relationships, and therefore that they could never be guilty of the type of crimes committed by the poison-pen.

He tries to make them see this for themselves in the middle of the novel, when he is already fairly sure of the identity of the criminal, by starting a conversation among them about honor and personal relationships. He posits a hypothetical situation just like the true one, in which a man had done something dishonorable 'for your sake', and draws out their reactions to it; without prompting, every

woman in the room gives some version of Harriet's reaction: 'If anybody did a dishonourable thing and then said he did it for one's own sake, it would be the last insult. How could one ever feel the same to him again?' The youngest don on staff goes so far as to say that 'she would feel like a man who – I mean, wouldn't it be like living on somebody's immoral earnings?' Lord Peter agrees with this analogy in part, saying that it is not the case yet, but that 'if it ever occurs to people to value the honour of the mind equally with the honour of the body, we shall get a social revolution of a quite unparalleled sort'.⁹³ His manner when he says this invests it with deep thematic significance, and it is not at all undermined by the subsequent cynical discussion of how rare such honor is. The Dean of the College claims that she thinks most women would not feel this way: 'How many women care two hoots about anybody's intellectual integrity? Only over-educated women like us,' and the Treasurer chimes in that most women would say 'My man, right or wrong.'⁹⁴ Much later, after the poison-pen has been revealed to be Annie, who did indeed say 'my man, right or wrong' to the exclusion of any other moral principle – almost exactly echoing these words in her closing rant⁹⁵ – Harriet must try to decide whether to despair altogether about the possibility of equal love, or give in to Peter's suit and possibly lose her independence. But the pessimism is only Harriet's own; the discussion about honor makes her decision to marry him the optimistic choice for the narrator and reader, a faith that one can retain one's honor and independence without having to live in an ivory tower. And despite what the Dean says, the Oxford setting of the novel reinforces the notion that gentlemanliness is a product of education, that it can be acquired. If that is the case, then the uniformly honorable women of Shrewsbury College are molding every woman who passes through their hands into a gentleman as well, so that in some misty future Harriet's happy compromise will not have to be so vanishingly rare an outcome.

In case any reader were tempted to see *Gaudy Night* as too optimistic, a mere projection into the future of a successful relationship, Sayers takes care to provide a full portrait of how the marriage of intellect and honor works out, in *Busman's Honeymoon*. In the earlier novel, Peter had summed up the essential principle of honor as 'personal attachments must come second to public duties'.⁹⁶ The murder that follows them on their honeymoon in the country tests how

committed Harriet really is to this principle – essentially, whether or not she is ready to allow Peter to engage in the unpleasant business of detecting and convicting a murderer on her watch, in her home. She balks when faced with the reality that if they succeed in finding the murderer, that person will be hanged, and that her husband will be responsible. ‘But must it be *your* hands – ?’ she asks him, and in her thoughts she connects his hands with their sexual passion on their wedding night.⁹⁷ Peter is dismayed, but he is willing to give in and flee the case with her, until Harriet reverses course, appalled at how close she had come to putting a personal emotional repugnance above a clear public duty: murderers must be found, especially for the sake of those who might be falsely accused. She essentially repeats the conversation from *Gaudy Night*, making the sexual theme explicit by her scornful commentary on women who would revel in having forced their husbands to put personal attachments above public duties:

“My husband would do *anything* for me. ...” It’s degrading. No human being ought to have such power over another.’

‘It’s a very real power, Harriet.’

‘Then,’ she flung back passionately, ‘we won’t use it. If we disagree, we’ll fight it out like gentlemen. We won’t stand for matrimonial blackmail.’

He was silent for a moment, leaning back against the chimney-breast. Then he said, with a lightness that betrayed him:

‘Harriet, you have no sense of dramatic values. Do you mean to say we are to play out our domestic comedy without the great bedroom scene?’

‘Certainly. We’ll have nothing so vulgar.’⁹⁸

Sayers requires that her hero and heroine have an honor of the body *and* of the mind. In later short stories about the Wimseys, she gives brief glimpses of their family life. Harriet and Peter have three sons, all of whom will no doubt carry on their parents’ ideas of honor into the postmodern era – though it might have been even more optimistic of Sayers to give them a daughter or two as well.

For Sayers, honor demands sacrifices, though rarely of her main characters. Margery Allingham also subjects her detective Albert Campion to the pain of placing duty above personal inclination

many times. Perhaps the most difficult of these situations is in *Dancers in Mourning* (1937). In this novel, Campion is called into a case to find a poison-pen who is tormenting a dance star, Jimmy Sutane. He begins the case working for Sutane, but is almost immediately placed in an ethically dubious position when he falls violently and suddenly in love with Sutane's wife Linda; almost simultaneously, murders begin to be committed, and all evidence points to Sutane as the criminal. Campion is reluctant to cooperate fully with the police because of loyalty to the man who hired him, exacerbated by feeling guilty over desiring his wife. As an older man puts it, 'Believe I've got a glimmer of your difficulty, but a soldier can't desert his post, a lawyer can't desert his client, a gentleman's got to meet his engagements.'⁹⁹ Soldier and lawyer were traditional gentlemanly positions; the elision between a lawyer's duty to his clients or a gentleman's social obligations, and a private detective's duty to *his* clients, is an interesting piece of class politics. Allingham equates the middle-class business conscience with a soldier's military honor, as Ngaio Marsh will also do with her gentleman-turned-detective, Roderick Alleyn. When the case is just one murder, Campion resolves his difficulties by withdrawing from it, but when the murderer escalates to a bomb that kills several innocent bystanders along with its target, he is forced by conscience to aid the police, no matter how much it pains him to think that if he contributes to having Sutane hanged, the possibility of him 'walking off with the lady' might be seen as his motivation.¹⁰⁰ Duty to the public good trumps his duty to individuals, but the conflict between two aspects of honor leads him into a mental state very close to insanity, according to the narrator, in which even his own body becomes alienated from him.¹⁰¹ At the moment that he realizes the murderer is a monster and must be stopped, and he comes forward to make his first voluntarily helpful statement to the police, he is described as standing 'limply, as though the weight of his own body had suddenly become oppressive to him'.¹⁰² In this physical manifestation of mental stress, he greatly resembles Lord Peter Wimsey, whose emotional repugnance to the actions his honor dictates frequently results in nightmares, fits of uncontrollable shaking, and other shell shock symptoms. Female characters of this period never suffer from similar symptoms, even when they experience a similar conflict between different responsibilities – a sharp reversal from the female-gendered

'hysterical' or 'neurotic' physical responses to stress in Victorian and New Woman novels.

Allingham's most trenchant point about honor in this novel, however, is contained in the supreme irony of its ending. Campion, the Scotland Yard detective assigned to the case profile the suspect, quite accurately. But, perhaps because his emotions were so engaged, Campion fails to realize that Sutane is not the only character in the immediate circle of suspects who fits the profile. In the last three pages, it is revealed that this other character is the murderer. Campion's relief at not having to betray Sutane is dizzying, an 'overwhelming flood which lifted him out of himself';¹⁰³ but what is more dizzying for the reader is the revelation that Sutane has known who the murderer was all along, and has been shielding him for exactly the same reason that Campion tried at first to shield Sutane. That is, Sutane had, in fact, walked off with the actual murderer's wife, a decade before, and his guilt over that prevented him from saying anything, even though he witnessed the first murder with his own eyes. Only when the murderer kills innocent bystanders does Sutane realize that he must be stopped. He tells Campion, 'But I didn't dream he'd go on. After Boarbridge I had to have you here. I *had* to, Campion! Don't you see, you were my conscience. You had to find him out. But I couldn't direct you. I couldn't give him away.' The novel ends with him saying to Campion, with tears in his eyes, 'How could I, old boy?'¹⁰⁴ There is no need for Campion to say anything further, because of course the reader knows that he understands Sutane's motivation perfectly, having shared it himself. Sutane is in the same dilemma, torn between two duties. He finesses it by hiring Campion, so that he can remain passive in the investigation himself. Campion does not have the same luxury, and is forced to aid the police actively, despite his distaste. For the reader, his anguish, and the means by which he overcomes it, is a lesson – a case study in the complications and liabilities of gentlemanliness. That his motivations are often explained in indirect or elliptical half-sentences, with only occasional moments of explicit elucidation (as in the scenes I have described above), is typical of Allingham's writing, but not of many middlebrow novels, which usually carried out their ideological education more explicitly.

Both Sayers and Allingham define honor as a willingness to put the public good above personal benefit, even the benefit of a loved

one rather than oneself. Miss de Vine, the Fellow, would never have kept silent about the dead man's research misconduct even had she known he had dependents who would be economically affected by his loss of a job, because the principle of academic integrity must be upheld. Champion brings himself to aid the police even when he believes that Linda Sutane will hate him for it in the end. There are, of course, many other possible components of honor. There are so many, in fact, that it can be difficult to define the concept except in the most general way. But aside from the ability to subordinate personal good to public good, most of the virtues that are usually understood as part of honor in the twenty-first century (or the nineteenth) revolve around some notion of 'integrity'. That can be understood as honesty, as keeping promises or making good on one's word, as the ability to keep confidences or not betray another who has trusted us, or even the just payment of debts. In other words, once one has entered an obligation, one must discharge it – a gentleman meets his engagements. This idea can be seen as morally virtuous in the nineteenth-century sense, but clearly also has elements derived from much older notions of honor, in which honor was 'repute' or one's image in front of others.¹⁰⁵ All of these specific instances of integrity rely on being *known as* someone whose 'word is bond'. The survival of this aspect of integrity in today's colloquial terminology illustrates that the concept of honor is far from outmoded or merely of historical interest. Clearly, the idea of honor as a reputation for integrity connects to the definition contained in the code of dueling, with its dependence on acknowledgment by others of equal status. Donna T. Andrew notes that the most serious insult that could lead to a duel was for one man to accuse another of lying.¹⁰⁶ Both Georgette Heyer and Ngaio Marsh concern themselves primarily with this second definition of honor, although both take care to redefine it carefully for middlebrow consumption. For both authors, it is important that one's honor and integrity be vulnerable to question from anyone, not just those of equal status.

The two Heyer novels which most clearly demonstrate her commitment to honor are *The Convenient Marriage* (1934), which is set in the eighteenth century, and *The Grand Sophy*. The earlier novel showcases a very young heroine, the 17-year-old Horatia Winwood, who is a female version of an aristocratic gentleman, not a Victorian one. She is impulsive (this trait being physically manifested by a

stammer, as she speaks so quickly), hot-tempered, and possessed of a completely male and aristocratic sense of honor. She marries her husband, the Earl of Rule, primarily in order that her older sister will be able to marry the man she really loves instead of the earl to whom she is promised. Sacrifice for a loved one is, of course, honorable, as long as there are no larger duties involved. The novel begins with this situation, and the romance is the story of Rule earning his wife's love despite her expectations. They clash frequently, but one reason Rule admires her so much and wishes to win her real love, rather than dutiful complaisance, is that she is an honorable opponent. During one of their first marital conflicts, he demands that she speak to him alone in the library; she refuses; he threatens to carry her there. When a footman comes out into the hall, 'Horatia shot a triumphant glance at the Earl, set one foot on the bottom stair, hesitated, and then swung round and walked back into the library.' The earl's comment is 'You play fair, Horry, at all events,' to which she replies 'Of c-course.'¹⁰⁷ Playing fair in this instance means not taking advantage of the presence of a servant, before whom Rule would hesitate to make a scene that would undermine Horatia's status in the household.

'Playing fair' is a motif of the novel. One main plotline is the attempt of Rule's old enemy Lord Lethbridge to seduce Horatia, for revenge on Rule. He is subtle about this, pretending merely to be friendly to her at first; Horatia cultivates his friendship in part in order to demonstrate her independence to Rule. Eventually, however, Lethbridge resorts to abduction and violence in order to achieve his ends. When Horatia realizes that he has duped her into his house late at night by drugging and replacing her coachman with his own, and that moreover he has locked her into the room with him, she protests 'So you don't even play f-fair!' and then comments 'I can't imagine how ever I c-could have wanted you for a friend.'¹⁰⁸ Horatia has more honor than Lethbridge, and is more of a gentleman. Within two pages, she is forced to defend her 'honor' in the same manner as Mary Challoner. When Lethbridge turns his back, she knocks him out cold with the fireplace poker. Presumably this is honorable, since he broke the rules first, and has a physical advantage that Horatia is allowed to overcome through the element of surprise.

It is important to note that the violence of the first two Heyer romance novels has altered somewhat in this third one. Mary

Challoner shoots Vidal and causes him to respect and love her; violence is necessary to the satisfactory outcome of their relationship. Horatia does not desire Lethbridge, and cares not at all how his attitude will change toward her because she successfully defends herself. Moreover, her obsession over the possibility that she may have killed him sets in motion a farcical cascade of events involving her irresponsible brother, and is treated comically. Although it may have seemed that violence underwrites her relationship with Rule (his threat to carry her to the library), in fact Heyer treats these undertones of violence with comedy too. Rule's sister advises him more than once to beat Horry, but he never does. In fact, his response is 'But think how fatiguing!' because he, unlike Vidal, has adopted the pose of a languid dandy rather than of a swashbuckler.¹⁰⁹ Though he and Lethbridge fight an entirely earnest duel with swords, in every other way the novel works to undermine the more macho aspects of the aristocratic code of honor that Heyer had used uncritically in the earlier two works. *The Convenient Marriage* is completely different in tone from the first two novels, and Heyer spent the rest of her career refining the lighter atmosphere that she introduced in this story. Until this point in her career, Heyer had written far more detective novels than romances; after *The Convenient Marriage* she turned her attention more and more to the lighter romance genre.

Heyer's mystery novels also use the 'playing fair' motif (the phrase is uttered by several of the early heroines, including Dinah Fawcett and Antonia Vereker). But she was not as programmatically committed to the same definition of honor – placing the public good above personal benefit – as Sayers. Her 1938 mystery novel *A Blunt Instrument* contains the two contemporary characters of hers who most exaggeratedly represent the stereotypes of the male and female of the period. Sally Drew, a crime novelist whose sister is implicated in a brutal murder, speaks forthrightly, smokes cigarettes from an amber holder, and wears a monocle. Neville Fletcher, the dead man's nephew, dresses in a sloppy bohemian way (he is even cleared of the murder because he only owns one hat, a disreputable black fedora), speaks in a languid, slow, slurred voice, and affects an attitude of complete detachment. His aunt, who loves him, admits to the detective that 'he is like so many of the young people nowadays, so strangely *heartless!*'¹¹⁰ Sally and Neville never speak of the murder in anything but a dispassionate way, frequently ironically, thus admirably

fulfilling my last criterion for gentlemanliness, which I will discuss below. But Sally refuses to put justice above Neville's safety. As soon as the detective makes Neville the chief suspect, Sally argues for condoning the supposed crime: 'If you did it, you must have had a darned good reason, and you have my vote.'¹¹¹ After Neville objects that surely the second victim can't be justified, Sally says:

'[he] knew too much about the first murder, and had to be disposed of. Unfortunately, of course, but, given the first murder, I quite see it was inevitable.'

Neville drew a deep breath. 'The weaker sex!' he said. 'When I recall the rubbish that has been written about women all through the ages, it makes me feel physically unwell. Relentless, primitive savagery! Inability to embrace abstract ideas of right and wrong utterly disruptive to society. Preoccupation with human passions nauseating and terrifying.'

Sally replied calmly: 'I think you're probably right. When it comes to the point we chuck all the rules overboard. Abstractions don't appeal to us much. We're more practical than you, and – yes, I suppose more ruthless. I don't mean that I *approve* of murder, and I daresay if I read about these two in the papers I should have thought them a trifle thick. But it makes a difference when you know the possible murderer.'¹¹²

Sally utters a direct refutation of Harriet Vane's notion of honor, calling it 'absolute rot' in the next breath, and supports herself with all of the essentialist clichés found in New Woman writing of the George Egerton variety (women are more savage and practical than men). It is difficult to know how seriously to take this passage, however, since Heyer's novels are all comedies. Neville's speech, which showcases his Lord-Peter-Wimsey-on-Quaaludes speaking style, is just as exaggerated as Sally's. Since neither of them is actually guilty of the murder, perhaps all this hypothesizing is meant simply as what Harriet Vane calls 'piffle'. But it is hard to reconcile with the principles of honor that Heyer herself consistently argued for in her romance novels.

In *The Grand Sophy*, while Charles Rivenhall marries Sophy because he admires her courage and strong will, he falls in love with her in the first instance because she shares his sense of honor. The novel

begins with Charles engaged to another woman, Sophy's polar opposite. She is sanctimonious in a Victorian way, and is somewhat anachronistically described as Evangelical as well, to cement the idea that she represents the coming of a darker era. She exercises a depressing influence on the entire Rivenhall family, and detaching Charles from her is Sophy's main goal from the minute she enters the house. But she accomplishes this more through being who she is than by any individual scheme or plan. The reason she has to go to a moneylender with a gun to get back her cousin Hubert's bond and ring is that she cannot persuade Hubert to confide in his older brother Charles. When Charles later asks her why she didn't just tell him about it herself, she says 'I am persuaded you could not seriously expect me to betray Hubert's confidence to you.'¹¹³ Later, in discussing the incident with his fiancée Eugenia, Charles is appalled to learn that Eugenia *would* have broken Hubert's confidence. He stares at her with 'an odd expression in his eyes' that the reader is meant to recognize as a dawning realization that he prefers Sophy to Eugenia. His actual commentary to Eugenia might stand as an encapsulation of the gender divide in the nineteenth century, as perceived by modernists: 'You are a female; perhaps you do not understand that a confidence reposed in you must – *must* – be held sacred! I said that I wished she had told me, but it was untrue! I could not wish anyone to betray a confidence! Good God, would I do so myself?'¹¹⁴ This last question goes to the heart of the matter. Eugenia is a lady, but not a gentleman. Sophy is a gentleman, and she proves it because she does the same thing in this situation that Charles would do himself. That is the key trait that heroes of modernist middlebrow novels seek in their wives.

There are other occasions when young men in Heyer's romance novels accuse women of not understanding honor, but most of them are humorous, and meant to show up the deficient principles of the men in question. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the question of the payment of debts. Young male aristocrats in Heyer's novels pay 'debts of honor' (gaming debts to their social equals) promptly, but have no qualms about letting their tradesmen's bills run on indefinitely. Their sisters, mothers, beloveds, etc. frequently take them to task for this, but are usually rebuffed. Since the woman uttering the criticism is usually the heroine, and since the heroes always pay all their debts, it is fairly clear that Heyer is satirizing the aristocratic

insouciance about debt. Because these romance novels are safely historical, Heyer's criticism of aristocratic improvidence can be fairly light; in her contemporary mystery novels, the subject rarely comes up – in fact the young men whom one would expect to be in debt, providing them with a motive for murder, often are not (for example, Randall Matthews of *Behold, Here's Poison*). Ngaio Marsh, however, does depict aristocratic malfeasance about debt in her mystery novels, and is unrelenting in her criticism.

Marsh's definition of honor is seen most clearly in *Death of a Peer* (originally published as *A Surfeit of Lampreys*, 1940). In this novel, a middle-class girl from New Zealand, Roberta Grey, becomes entangled with a charming family of English aristocrats who embody the stereotype of feckless and penniless opulence. They are constantly on the verge of financial crisis and always in debt, until Lord Charles Lamprey's older brother, the Marquis of Wutherwood, bails them out. When the Marquis is murdered just outside their flat after refusing to pay their debts again, the whole family comes under suspicion, but they are so charming that everyone in their orbit, including Roberta, rushes to defend them. The one exception is Alleyn. He forces the family doctor to give him a portrait of the family that exposes the shallowness of their morals:

'Suppose you had to find a string of appropriate adjectives for the Lampreys, what would they be? Charming, of course. What else?'

'What the devil does it matter how I describe them?'

'I should like to hear, however.'

'Good Lord! Well, amusing, and ah – well ah –'

'Upright?' suggested Alleyn. 'Businesslike? Scrupulous? Reliable? Any of those jump to the mind?'

'They're kind,' said Dr. Kantripp, turning rather red. 'They're extremely good-natured. They wouldn't hurt a fly.'¹¹⁵

The doctor reluctantly admits they don't even pay his own bills on time, and yet vehemently defends them from any suspicion in the murder, despite the obvious financial advantage the family would reap, since Lord Charles is his brother's heir. Kantripp tries to defend them by saying 'It's the way they are bred, I suppose,' but Alleyn refuses to allow that on the grounds that 'Business consciences aren't

entirely bounded by the little fences of class, are they?'¹¹⁶ In this novel, the possession of a business conscience is a mark of honor, and Alleyn, who is upper-class by birth himself, insists that anyone can have one.

Nicola Humble cites this novel, in which Roberta marries Henry, the oldest Lamprey son, as a key example of one way the middlebrow novel annexes aristocratic identities – as she puts it, the ‘aristocrats are “bagged” for the middle classes’.¹¹⁷ Not only does Roberta ‘bag’ Henry, but Alleyn makes it clear that the aristocrats will only survive if they adapt to middle-class values, and redefine gentlemanliness to include them. Yet the Lamprey family is undeniably charming, and the narrator in general works to make the reader sympathize with them as much as their friends do; the Lampreys were based on a real family with whom Ngaio Marsh had a long and affectionate relationship, according to Kathryn Slate McDorman, who calls *Death of a Peer* her ‘most autobiographical novel’.¹¹⁸ But that sense of identification makes the need for aristocrats to evolve in a bourgeois direction seem all the more urgent.

Of course, the definitions of honor used by these three authors, or middlebrow novels in general, cannot be entirely consistent in every detail. Roberta, for example, perhaps because of her truly middle-class background, is more concerned with the ‘repute’ aspect of honor than someone like Harriet Vane (who cares about her reputation only as it might be made to hurt Peter), and she is also willing to put personal commitments above public duties or honesty. One of the most telling incidents in *Death of a Peer* is Alleyn’s interrogation of Roberta. During this interrogation, Alleyn wants to get to the bottom of a conversation that Lord Charles’ young adult children had overheard by lying on the floor and listening at the crack under a door; the room in which they had done this is the one being used by police for interrogations, and they have already found the evidence that several people have lain on the floor eavesdropping. Alleyn wants at least one eavesdropper to give him an honest account of the conversation, but he already knows the basic truth of it from several other sources. When confronted with physical evidence that she has listened in on a private conversation, Roberta is mortified. ‘It hadn’t seemed such an awful thing to do at the time, Roberta told herself wildly. The Lampreys had assured her that Lord Charles wouldn’t mind. In a way it had been rather fun. Why, oh why, should it show

so shabbily, now that this man asked her about it? Lying on the floor with her ears to the door! Spying! Her cheeks were burning coals.¹¹⁹ This passage shows that Roberta does endorse the middle-class version of honor as honesty or integrity, and contrasts her with the Lampreys, who are cheerfully amoral even though their birth is impeccably aristocratic – a clear instance of the middlebrow novel's agenda of subsuming the aristocracy into the upper middle class.

But Alleyn goes on to expose other, less admirable, aspects of Roberta's conception of honor by his next comments. She admits she has listened to the conversation because it is impossible to deny it, but when he asks her to repeat what she has heard, she refuses, falling back on another component of honor, the keeping of confidences. But Alleyn's response to her refusal is devastating to her:

'We'll have to see if any of the servants were about,' said Alleyn thoughtfully. A hot blast of fury and shame prevented Roberta from understanding that he was not deliberately insulting her, deliberately suggesting that she had behaved like an untrustworthy housemaid. And she could say nothing to justify herself. She heard her own voice stammering out words that meant nothing. In a nightmare of shame she looked at her own indignity.¹²⁰

She becomes so discomposed that Alleyn has to get up and practically embrace her to reassure her. Her agonizing shame is clearly based on the older notion of honor, one's image before others, and also has rather ugly class connotations.

Perhaps because of the emotional distress Alleyn has unwittingly caused her, Roberta resolves to speak about the conversation after all, but to lie. She claims that Lord Wutherwood had promised to give his brother the money, specifically as an attempt at self-sacrifice: 'The word perjury was caught up in her thoughts with a dim notion of punishment. But she could do them [the Lampreys] no harm. Only herself, because she lied to the police in the execution of their duty.'¹²¹ Roberta knows that lying is a breach of honor, and seems to be irrationally trying to use this breach to atone for the previous one of eavesdropping. But of course this is the way in which she is most different from Harriet Vane, because lying to the police about a murder in order to protect people she loves passionately is an obvious instance of putting personal relationships above public

duties. If Henry had the same honor Peter does, he would feel that her perjury for his sake is insulting just as Harriet claims she would in *Gaudy Night*. But Henry, the charming aristocrat, isn't bothered by Roberta's perjury at all. Interestingly, Alleyn doesn't condemn Roberta either. The police already know she is lying, but Alleyn looks on her perjury indulgently – his only comment is 'Courageous little liar ... isn't she?'¹²² Since he is portrayed throughout the series as a man of unimpeachable honor, in both the old and the modern senses – more than once, he puts his public duty to solve a case above his personal desire to pursue Agatha Troy – his benevolent attitude here is anomalous. Perhaps it is enough to say that Marsh is more cynical and less programmatically committed to changing men's and women's definitions of honor and their relationships with each other than Sayers; which makes it all the more significant that her novels do live up to Sayers' ideals in so many ways, if not all.

A final note on 'playing fair': Heyer is the one who uses this exact phrase most commonly, although Christie does as well. Interestingly, Heyer was not a member of the Detection Club, as were all four other mystery authors I examine in this study. This club, founded in the late 1920s by, among others, Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie, was more social than anything else. But it did impose a lighthearted 'oath' upon its members, and all authors who belonged were expected to follow the 'rules' drawn up by Ronald Knox in 1928.¹²³ These rules were primarily designed to reassure a reader who failed to figure out the murderer's identity before it was revealed in the ending that the author had not 'cheated' in putting it together. An author had to 'play fair' with her readers, and the fair play ethos is seen by Lee Horsley as one of the quintessentially English features of the classic detective novel.¹²⁴ The schoolboy notion of gentlemanly honor clearly penetrated very deeply into the mystery form, and it should not be surprising that the Queens of Crime extended it to women.

Rationalism and irony

One aspect of the 'fair play' rules for detective fiction was that authors could not use 'women's intuition' as a means of solving the crime. Carla Kungl argues that Dorothy Sayers' particular insistence on this rule was a manifestation of her feminism – disallowing intuition was not just playing fair with the reader, but also with women.

Sayers wanted women's reasoning to be viewed as the same as men's, as a logical process that is a 'learned and cultivated attribute' rather than an inborn trait that women can't help or control.¹²⁵ Just as Mary Wollstonecraft saw 'improveable reason' as the most essential trait of humanity, male or female, so too Dorothy Sayers saw 'cultivated' rationality. The most distinctively 'modern' trait of the Female Gentleman in middlebrow novels is her possession of learned reason, and her ability and desire to subordinate emotion to that reason. In one sense emotional control is simply an aspect of honor, because the will to make decisions based on rationality rather than feelings is important to being able to choose social goods over personal goods. But emotional control was significant in its own right, because of its loaded value in the post-World War I climate. Shell shock and shattered nerves were everywhere, and therefore cool, calm, emotionally reserved behavior became highly valued by contrast. Both male and female characters of honor from this period display emotional self-possession so intense that modern psychology might call it unhealthy; but their emotional self-possession only seems so extreme by contrast with the many characters around them who have no self-control at all, and who make others' lives miserable as a result. Older characters sometimes find the ironic, detached, or cold manners of the young to be irritating, but they condemn the nervous outbreaks of the emotionally shattered as well. In middlebrow novels the detached irony of the young leads to comedy rather than to the kind of haunted or lyrically dark tone of highbrow modernist writing, but the impulses are the same.

Dating back as far as the eighteenth century, honor and virtue have been depicted in British culture as springing either from reason or from emotion; the dominance has swung back and forth between the classical rationalism of the early eighteenth century and Enlightenment, the sentimentalism of the later eighteenth century, the rationalism of the French Revolution period, and the particularly cloying sentimentalism of the Victorians. The modernist period is generally agreed to have reverted to a preference for the cooler, more detached stance of rationalism, especially to be found in the ironic tone adopted by young people of both sexes in the period. A middle-aged woman in Agatha Christie's *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1935) sums up another character by calling her 'a modern unsentimental young woman'.¹²⁶ This casual reference shows how much lack of

sentimentality was felt to be typical of youth during the period. Ngaio Marsh's *Overture to Death* (1939) similarly encapsulates the generational shift from Victorian sentiment to modern rationalism in its opening quarrel between the local squire and his son. Jocelyn Jernigham accuses his son, and the rest of 'the present generation', of having 'no feeling for that sort of thing [tradition and land]', but instead only 'cheap sneers and clever talk that mean nothing'. Henry, the son, is incapable of replying to his father without 'that tinge of irony which Jocelyn, who did not understand it, found so irritating'.¹²⁷

The substance of the men's argument is the value of sentimental attachment to the estate and the name; Jocelyn wants to invoke this attachment to prevent Henry from marrying a woman who doesn't have enough money to help keep up the estate. Henry rejects this argument, and all the Victorian values that underwrite it. Of course, he does this in the service of love, so he is not exactly a paragon of rationality. But he and his beloved, Dinah Copeland, adopt a pose of modern detachment about the impulses of love and sexuality throughout the novel. The young couple's romance is strongly opposed by Henry's aunt, Eleanor Prentice, a middle-aged spinster whose monomania about sex turns out to be the motivation for the murder as well as other hysterical episodes. Earlier, she had been verbally poisonous to Dinah and Henry, but Dinah proclaims that the nasty sexual innuendoes mean nothing to her, because 'We simply look at her from a detached analytical angle and are vaguely sorry for her. That's all.'¹²⁸ Since she ends this declaration on 'a dry sob', her rationalism is suspect at best. But the desire for detachment is a real impulse, seen over and over in novels of the period. Characters may not always achieve it, but in general their narrators approve of them for trying. The idea of detachment links the rationalism of the characters to gender politics through Virginia Woolf. Jane Dowson argues that the female British poets of the 1930s were influenced by the ideals of androgyny and impersonality advocated by Virginia Woolf in 1929 in *A Room of One's Own*.¹²⁹ Dowson also describes at length the way that the more politically committed female poets of the 1930s adopted the official communist values of sexlessness among narrator, reader, and author: 'In party politics women were presumed to be honorary men.'¹³⁰ While none of the middlebrow authors I examine were politically radical, they were very much in tune with

the current movements in politics and highbrow art of their time. The idea of feminism as sexless reached its height in the 1930s; if one does not take the term 'Female Gentleman' as an oxymoron, then the concept it denotes is the epitome of Woolf's androgyny.

The most explicit discussion of emotion and its relation to androgyny can be found in Margery Allingham's *The Fashion in Shrouds* (1938). In this novel, Amanda Fitton reappears in Albert Campion's life after a six-year gap. In that time she has lost none of her pep, and is working as an aircraft designer. She pretends to be engaged to Campion throughout the novel (a common enough device in romance novels, but not so frequent in mysteries), as the two pursue a killer who is implicating Campion's sister, Val, a successful fashion designer. The novel is a full-length meditation on the difference between sex and gender, although it does not use modern theoretical terms for these concepts. Amanda, Val, the actress Georgia Wells, and Val's employer, the elderly Lady Papendeik, are each presented as one possible combination of femaleness with femininity. Lady Papendeik, a French businesswoman frequently referred to by characters who like her as Tante Marthe, sets the terms of this theme early in the novel when she is discussing Val's love affair with Alan Dell (an airplane designer and Amanda Fitton's boss): 'You bore me, you young people, when you talk about one sex or the other, as if they were separate things. There is only one human entity and that is a man and a woman. The man is the silhouette, the woman is the detail. The one often spoils or makes the other. But apart they are so much material.'¹³¹ This sounds at first like a sanitized version of the story from Plato's *Symposium*, in which the original dual-bodied humans are always trying to find their lost soulmate after having been separated by Zeus in anger. Lady Papendeik herself probably means it this way. As the novel progresses, however, it becomes clear that it is each individual, discrete human who is both a man and a woman. Val speaks of 'female women', as if there could be some other kind.¹³² Val and Georgia are both female women, whereas the narrator says that Amanda is 'the perfect gent'¹³³ – a male woman, or a Female Gentleman.

The distinction between these two kinds of women is not the possession of intelligence, but how it is used. Rationality leads to self-control, which is the essence of being 'male' in Allingham's works. During a particularly tense scene, the narrator contrasts Val and

Georgia: 'They were both entirely female, both sharp-witted, both realists, but whereas the one [Val] had a balanced intellect in control the other was as wanton and unexpected as a rudderless steamboat in a gale.'¹³⁴ Amanda, too, is intelligent and rational; her cottage near the airplane works, where she lives independently, is 'like Amanda inasmuch as it was both small and astonishingly rational', and it is filled with labor-saving devices she has invented herself, 'all of a startlingly practical rather than a merely gadgety character'.¹³⁵ Amanda is always in full personal self-control without any wrenching effort, whereas Val's intellectual control of her emotions comes at a great cost to her. The difference is that one is 'feminine' and the other is not.

In the end, Val agrees to marry Alan Dell after he explicitly declares that if she does so she will give up her independence and her career, and in return he 'should assume full responsibility for' her. She says yes 'so quickly that she startled herself' and realizes that what she was looking for in a man was 'Authority. The simple nature of her desire from him took her breath away. ... She was a clever woman who would not or could not relinquish her femininity, and femininity unpossessed is femininity unprotected from itself.'¹³⁶ Just a page earlier she had been unhappy because 'Her own exacting intelligence, her own insufferably responsible importance, weighted her down like a pack.'¹³⁷ She wants to give up the weight of her career, because of which the welfare of hundreds of employees at Papendeik's couture house depends on her. The only way to do it is to let an old-fashioned man – a male man – take it from her. This scene seems on the surface to be almost aggressively anti-feminist, because, as Gill Plain puts it, 'Allingham has mobilised an intelligent, practical woman, shown what she can do, and then firmly put her back within the confines of traditional femininity.' Yet Plain herself admits that 'the depiction of Val cannot easily be pigeon-holed as conservative'.¹³⁸ Plain gives up on *Fashion in Shrouds* to focus instead on a Kristevan reading of Campion's relationship with Amanda in *Traitor's Purse* (1941), and she sees the outbreak of World War II as an event that caused a sea change in Allingham's gender politics.¹³⁹ But postmodern separation of sex from gender is present even in the pre-World War II novels. The narrator compares Val's intellect and importance to a heavy pack that she wishes to put down, but her femininity is also a wholly alienable and separate entity, a thing that could also be 'relinquished'. The language of the scene seems

to make all of these things equally into matters of choice, and a different person than Val might have chosen to put down the weight of femininity rather than the weight of intellect. That she does not do so shows her to be one type of woman, but the novel is agnostically prepared to accept the existence of a different type of woman altogether.

Amanda seems to give up control in the same way that Val does, when she and Campion fake a violently quarrelsome end to their engagement. She allows him to throw her into the Thames in full view of witnesses, surely a humiliating experience no matter how prearranged. But her self-concept remains completely unaffected, and she ends the novel by comforting him when he is becoming too maudlin over their as-yet-unsettled relationship. Val tells her brother earlier in the novel that he is 'a sensible, reasonable, masculine soul' and that if he were disappointed in love he would 'think it all out like a little gent and think it all quietly away, taking the conventional view and the intelligent path', which she and Georgia can't do because they are both 'feminine'. Val says she tries to overcome it and 'use my head constructively', while Georgia doesn't even bother, and as a result, is 'sailing with the tide'.¹⁴⁰ At the end of the novel, however, Campion himself is the one overcome by what Amanda had earlier called 'cake love as opposed to the bread-and-butter kind'¹⁴¹ – that is, too violently emotional and uncontrolled by practical reason. Amanda never succumbs to cake love, and is a more 'perfect little gent' than Campion himself.¹⁴² To extend Val's terminology, Campion, perhaps, is a female man, while Amanda is a male woman, and the two of them together would make the perfect composite human entity Lady Papendeik had previously described. So, too, would Val and Alan Dell, the female woman and the male man. The novel does not reject Victorian gender ideology so much as attempt to extend it to encompass more combinations of sex and gender. Control of the emotions by a rationally imposed willpower seems to be a 'male' quality, one that female women can emulate, but which will not come naturally to them. Since it does come naturally to Amanda, it is clear that Allingham's view of gender was complex, to say the least. There are relatively few such male women in her novels, and she represents the rarity of the Female Gentleman more vividly than any other novelist I am examining; but her discussion of the concepts in her books is also more explicit, which perhaps makes her

a more valuable stimulus to self-conscious identity formation for today's reader.

Ngaio Marsh was much more consistent and straightforward in depicting excessive emotionalism as the chief barrier to honorable or feminist behavior. Although the narrator of *Overture to Death* is gently ironic about Dinah Copeland's 'detachment', there is a strong correlation in Marsh's novels between excessive emotionalism and being a murderer, and characters who are able to be ironic are usually preferred. This is especially apparent in the character of Agatha Troy, the painter who eventually marries Roderick Alleyn. In the early novels, Troy is depicted as being 'bad at' or shy of emotion. She dislikes other people's emotional displays, both as a matter of personal preference and also on principle. In the first novel in which she appears, *Artists in Crime* (1938), she disapproves of any of her art students sleeping with each other or having relationships at all, on the grounds that it's 'too muddly'¹⁴³ – an opinion which is proved correct, as the murder results from what Alleyn later calls the 'labyrinth of untidy emotions' and overlapping sexual relationships among the students.¹⁴⁴ Troy's resistance to emotional interactions forms a barrier to Alleyn's romantic pursuit of her, which he has to overcome. She, like Harriet Vane, is horrified by the successful outcome of murder cases, in which the criminal is executed, and is hard pressed to separate her vision of Alleyn from that horror.¹⁴⁵ By 1947, Troy's horror at her husband's job was enough of a problem that Marsh purged her of it in *Final Curtain*. In this novel, Troy encounters the histrionic Ancred family (some of them are actors, but all of them play their emotions on a larger-than-life personal stage) and must learn how to deal with them, despite the fact that, as she says, 'I shy away from emotion like a nervous mare.'¹⁴⁶ She constantly has to judge and evaluate the Ancreds' apparent emotions in order to be able to give Alleyn good descriptions after the inevitable murder takes place. Her detachment from emotion and painter's eye for observation make it possible for Alleyn to solve the case, and her success at overcoming her emotional revulsion from his job ironically deepens their own emotional relationship.

Dorothy Sayers' definition of honor discussed above – 'personal attachments must come second to public duties'¹⁴⁷ – is clearly based on properly subordinating and controlling emotion. Peter's romantic pursuit of Harriet is blocked by the exact same sort of emotional

detachment and revulsion that affects Alleyn's relationship with Troy, exacerbated by the fact that both parties are suffering to some extent from post-traumatic stress. In the early novels, Peter is established firmly as a shell shock victim whose avocation often brings on relapse attacks toward the close of a case, and his brittle and ironic manner is depicted as a reaction to that shell shock. Shell shock is a motif of Sayers' early novels, and its constant lurking presence in the 1920s explains the desire for detachment that the younger people all show. The centrality of shell shock to high modernist conceptions of masculinity and individuality is well established. As Suzette Henke explains, "The modernist period is not only circumscribed, but virtually defined by historical trauma. ... It is little wonder that the psychological effects of so-called *shell shock* were first anatomized in soldiers afflicted during the Great War, when traumatized combatants were often dismissed as malingerers or executed as traitors. Such was the bloody inauguration of contemporary psychoanalysis, with Sigmund Freud spearheading the reinterpretation of "male hysteria" and neurasthenia in terms of combat neurosis."¹⁴⁸ The trope of shell-shocked men recurs frequently in both highbrow and middlebrow literature of this period; Septimus Warren Smith of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* stands as the emblem of all postwar men, scarred and then abandoned by a society that first wounded them, then failed to understand them.

Sayers treats full-blown shell shock very similarly to Woolf, with a clear political undertone. *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (1928) depicts Captain George Fentiman as Wimsey's dark double. He has suffered worse physical injuries than Peter and has not recovered the tone of his mind as well. Peter has nightmares, but Fentiman has acute dissociative episodes. When the body of his grandfather is discovered in the smoking room of his club, Fentiman bursts into hysterical laughter and 'Take him away,' said Fentiman, 'take him away. He's been dead two days! So are you! So am I! We're all dead and we never noticed it!' The senior members of the club are shocked by his outburst, but 'the younger men felt no sense of outrage; they knew too much'. Their only response is to take him away for a drink.¹⁴⁹ Ariela Freedman argues that, cutting against the grain of medical orthodoxy of her day, 'Sayers insists on shell shock as a permanent trauma. The soldier cannot return to his normative self, and England cannot return to any real or imagined prior

innocence.¹⁵⁰ While I agree with Freedman in general, it is also important to note that Sayers does not simply paint shell shock patients as virtuous or pitiable. Every emotionally scarred character in her novels chooses whether to try to control his or her emotions, or to allow them to run rampant at the expense of other people. George Fentiman's uncontrollable outbursts recur throughout *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* as an indictment of the war that created him, but the narrator treats him with a distancing irony that prevents a reader from identifying with him. Instead, the novels valorize the characters like Peter and Harriet who can control, or at least conceal, their trauma.

Fentiman's outbursts make him a suspect in the murder, and his nervous problems also make him rude to his wife. Peter is treated to several fights between them, in which Fentiman rants about 'hard-mouthed, cigarette-smoking females' who take all the jobs (he is unemployed and his wife's wages support them), and in the same breath accuses his wife of being 'just like a woman. You can't argue about things in general – you always have to bring it down to some one little personal instance.'¹⁵¹ Here Fentiman sounds exactly like Romney Leigh insisting that Aurora Leigh can never be a poet, but ironically it is his own emotions that are out of control because of his mental illness, not his wife's. He apologizes repeatedly for his temper, but his brutal treatment of Sheila shows that a lack of emotional control has victims beyond the shell shock patient himself, and gives some justification to the sententious condemnation of the younger generation of men uttered by Colonel Marchbanks at the end of the novel: 'Sometimes, Lord Peter, I think that the War has had a bad effect on some of our young men. ... I certainly notice a less fine sense of honor in these days than we had when I was a boy. There were not so many excuses made then for people; there were things that were done and things that were not done.'¹⁵² Such speeches about the degeneration of the young are common in middlebrow novels of the period. While Sayers by no means leaves Marchbanks' attitude unchallenged, she also chooses to invest more time in characters like Peter or Harriet, who can overcome their own trauma for each other's sake.

Sayers treats shell shock as a real disorder that fundamentally changed the way people related to one another, and does not endorse the lack of sympathy found in older people of the 1920s and 1930s.

Heyer, however, generally includes characters with 'nervous' temperaments in order to condemn or ridicule them for their lack of emotional control. In *The Unfinished Clue*, for example, the 'nervous' temperament of the victim's son makes him a suspect, and his outbursts (like George Fentiman, he begins laughing hysterically when he learns of his father's death) are treated as tantrums by the narrator as well as the other characters. Her preference in all her novels is for characters who have a cool manner – both the hero and heroine of *Why Shoot a Butler?* (1933) are self-possessed in manner to the point of brusqueness. In the first few pages of that novel, the hero is described as 'hard' and the heroine as 'self-possessed' several times. He has found her standing over a dead body with a loaded gun in her pocket; she doesn't act hysterical, and he is neither solicitous nor condemnatory. Neither talks much, and in fact he says to her 'Not exactly communicative, are you?'¹⁵³ Yet despite this surface of flat affect, both characters are deeply emotional. Frank Amberley, the hero, is sarcastic in speech to everyone, at all times, but shows his love for Shirley Brown in his actions when she is in danger. She is self-possessed on the surface, but we learn that it is a façade to hide her pain over the deep difficulties she has encountered in her life: an alcoholic brother, dead parents, being defrauded of her inheritance. The plot of the novel is her attempt to reclaim that inheritance, and she faces obstacles without complaining – with the gallant courage Heyer celebrates so frequently in her novels. Despite the coolness the hero and heroine display toward each other and everyone else, the reader is supposed to sympathize with them, all the more so because they refuse to behave histrionically about their very real hardships. The emotional turmoil lurking just under the surface explains the preference for light, detached, ironic attitudes in all the novels of this period. As long as every character can maintain ironic detachment, the frightening excesses of a George Fentiman or an Eleanor Prentice can be held at bay.

Heyer takes the preference for irony so far that some of the male leads of her modern mysteries can seem repellently sarcastic, for example Randall Matthews of *Behold, Here's Poison* (1936), who is described by his cousin Stella (who ends the novel by becoming engaged to him) as 'an amiable snake ... smooth, and fanged'.¹⁵⁴ Later in the novel, Stella snaps at her exceedingly hysterical brother that 'I'd sooner have Randall being waspish than this – this

atmosphere of faked-up emotion! At least he's normal, but you and Mother and Aunt Harriet are like people out of a Russian play!¹⁵⁵ Configurations of this basic scene occur in several of Heyer's modern mysteries – the lead male and female characters are distinguished by their relative emotional restraint from the sea of overly emotional characters around them, many of whom are hypocrites, 'faking up' the emotion to manipulate others. Given that Randall really does say some extremely rude things, not just to the side characters but also to Stella herself, her preference for him over the others is telling. Between the wars, excess or sham emotionalism was apparently so rife in British society that any amount of hard sarcasm was preferable.

The novelistic preference for emotional control and rationality is parodied by Stella Gibbons in *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932). Of course, this novel is better known as a parody of the overwritten style of other modernists. But while Flora Poste, the extremely sensible heroine, gives short shrift to her Starkadder cousins' emotional excesses, she herself is so excessively commonsensical that she probably also represents a satire of the competent, comradely girl found so often in middlebrow novels. Like Sophy Stanton-Lacy (Heyer's 'Grand Sophy'), Flora ruthlessly manages a large family of eccentric cousins, solving their problems despite themselves, and paying no attention to their protests. This project is described by her as a plan to 'tidy up life at Cold Comfort'.¹⁵⁶ Earlier in the novel she had told her friend, Mrs Smiling, that 'unless everything is tidy and pleasant and comfortable all about one, people cannot even begin to enjoy life. I cannot *endure messes*.'¹⁵⁷ The author of messes and enemy of tidying up is Aunt Ada Doom: 'Persons of Aunt Ada's temperament were not fond of a tidy life. Storms were what they liked; plenty of rows, and doors being slammed, and jaws sticking out, and faces white with fury, and faces brooding in corners, and faces making unnecessary fuss at breakfast, and plenty of opportunities for gorgeous emotional wallowings.'¹⁵⁸ Flora sees this gorgeous emotionality as 'uncivilized',¹⁵⁹ and her mission in life is to tidy it up. Nicola Humble connects this opposition between tidy and stormy to the novel's frequent references to Jane Austen and the Brontës; Flora transforms the 'Brontë-world' of *Cold Comfort Farm* 'with the energy of an Emma', because 'the modern world requires the open rationalism of an Austen'.¹⁶⁰ Of course, Flora herself is so emotionally tidy that she borders on passivity. Early in

the novel, she recounts how she got through school despite hating 'games':

'Well – first of all, I used to stand quite still and stare at the trees and not think about anything. ... But I found that people *would* bump into me, so I had to give up standing still, and run like the others. I always ran after the ball because, after all, Mary, the ball *is* important in a game, isn't it? until I found they didn't like me doing that, because I never got near it or hit it or did whatever you are supposed to do to it.

'So then I ran *away* from it instead, but they didn't seem to like that either.'¹⁶¹

While the picture here conjured up of a sleekly coiffed modern girl standing still on the athletic field is hilarious, it does tend to make Flora seem calm to the point of unreality. She would probably be annoying to know in real life. Some of the extreme passivity and self-centeredness of the early chapters of the novel dissipates once she gets to *Cold Comfort*, however, and for the most part, Flora is a good example of a Female Gentleman. Gibbons' parody of modern rationalism is only a gentle critique.

Agatha Christie was more consistently and thoroughly critical of the unsentimentality valued by other writers of this period. While Tuppence is proud of not being sentimental, it is clear that Tommy wishes she were a bit more so, and at one point in *The Secret Adversary*, he complains, 'If you ask me,' said Tommy, 'we're all too damned business-like nowadays. We're always saying "Will it pay?" The men are bad enough, and the girls are worse!'¹⁶² Of course, once Tuppence agrees to marry him, he's content to have her describe marriage as being 'a sport!'¹⁶³ rather than anything too romantic or emotional; their relationship is bread-and-butter love, not cake love. *Sad Cypress* (1939), however, is a much more thorough indictment of unsentimentality. This novel's plot is like a combination of Sayers' *Strong Poison* and *Unnatural Death*, and I believe that the protagonist, Elinor Carlisle, is meant to be taken as a commentary on Harriet Vane for that reason. Like *Strong Poison*, *Sad Cypress* begins with the murder trial of a woman being deliberately framed by an unscrupulous poisoner. Poirot is retained by a man in love with the accused, Dr Peter Lord (impossible for this not to be a reference to Lord Peter). Elinor's

character is key to the famous Christie guessing game – we are to wonder whether she might have done it, even though half of the novel is focalized through her point of view. She is a perfect 1930s Female Gentleman: nothing like the intrepid and outgoing 1920s heroines, Tuppence Beresford or ‘Bundle’ Brent, but instead a highly controlled person whom everyone describes as well-bred, with delicately arched eyebrows used to signal irony – exactly like Flora Poste on the outside. Her fiancé says to her at the beginning of the novel that it is her ‘aloof’ air that makes him love her, that she is not ‘dog-like and devoted ... emotions slopping all over the place’ but rather ‘cool’ and ‘detached’.¹⁶⁴ This is a perfect description of most of the 1930s Female Gentlemen. Unfortunately for Elinor, she is feigning her detachment precisely because she knows Roddy would hate the dog-like devotion she really feels. She almost pleads guilty because she knows that she wanted to kill the victim, to whom Roddy had been attracted, and her ‘sensitive and fastidious conscience’ makes her feel guilty.¹⁶⁵ Elinor is honorable, so Christie allows Poirot to save her, and even provides her a suitable rebound lover in the form of the decidedly ‘ordinary’ Dr Lord, whose face ‘didn’t hurt her as Roddy’s face always hurt her; it gave her no sharp pang of pain and pleasure mixed’.¹⁶⁶ But this very ending highlights how unhealthy both her deep emotions and her detached self-control over them have been. Christie would never have accepted as a hero someone as sarcastic as Randall Matthews or as neurotic as Lord Peter Wimsey, and here she also provides a more moderated vision of the Female Gentleman.

Christie’s skepticism about the value of emotional detachment is an exception to the larger pattern of the decade, in which the characters generally speak and act unemotionally. The irony that this rationalist attitude produces has an important effect on the reader’s experience of these books, which reinforces their class politics. That is, the narrator and characters create a charmed circle through their way of speaking, one that the reader can enter while most of the other characters in the book cannot. The use of irony to create this charmed circle in Female Gentleman novels is a special case of the more general effect of detective fiction in which the reader can ‘enter into a privileged “insider” compact with the author’, as the two share a puzzle-solving ability others might lack.¹⁶⁷ This relationship really is present in most detective fiction of any era, but Female Gentleman

novels take it to a higher degree, and it is present even in such novels that are not mysteries. The best place to begin illustrating this effect is with Lord Peter Wimsey. Harriet Vane's brush with death in *Strong Poison* warps her temperament into pessimism, and she claims after the fact that this was the most important barrier keeping her from giving in to Peter's courtship; she simply could never believe that he sincerely meant the things he said to her about love, honor, or intellectual equality in marriage because they seemed too good to be true. Yet even in the midst of the trauma that produces this pessimism, while she is being held in Holloway prison pending her retrial for murder, Harriet and Peter's courtship proceeds by means of ironic banter. Peter actively attempts to distract her from her trauma by 'bright back-chat' that 'cheers the patient'. For example, he imagines her own case as the plot of a novel, and induces her to come up with ever more improbable ways to solve it, that leave her with 'dancing eyes' in spite of her situation.¹⁶⁸ Wimsey's persona in all the novels is always an exaggeration of the shallow, aristocratic man about town, who says things like 'cheer-frightfully-ho and all that' as a farewell; Harriet matches him with "'I will give the footman orders to admit you," said the prisoner, gravely; "you will always find me at home."¹⁶⁹ Such jokes under pressure, showing cool emotional restraint, are exactly the means to the heart of an aristocrat like Wimsey in the interwar era. He, in turn, plays almost a parody of his own already exaggerated persona during the scenes in which he visits Harriet in prison, clearly to amuse her.

During the third visit, he badgers her with jealousy of her dead lover, and then, after she complains of his treatment, says 'seriously'¹⁷⁰ that he understands how terrible it is when lovers are jealous, and after a lengthy analysis of the origin of the problem and how to solve it, hits on the solution of making her jealous in return. His complete air of deadpan analysis of the problem brings her back from the edge of tears, and he follows up by mentioning his ex-fiancée:

'Who was Barbara?' asked Harriet, quickly.

'Oh, a girl. I owe her quite a lot, really,' replied Wimsey, musingly. 'When she married the other fellow, I took up sleuthing as a cure for wounded feelings, and it's really been great fun, take it all in all. Dear me, yes – I was very much bowled over that time. I even took a special course in logic for her sake.'

‘Good gracious!’

‘For the pleasure of repeating “Barbara celarent darii ferio baralipton.” There was a kind of mysterious romantic lilt about the thing which was somehow expressive of passion. Many a moonlight night have I murmured it to the nightingales which haunt the gardens of St. Johns – though, of course, I was a Balliol man myself, but the buildings are adjacent.’

‘If anybody ever marries you, it will be for the pleasure of hearing you talk piffle,’ said Harriet, severely.¹⁷¹

‘Piffle’ of exactly this sort is the foundation of the relationship between the characters, throughout the next three books.

Here, as elsewhere, the ‘piffle’ establishes class affinities between the two characters through its erudition and casual Oxford references, and yet also invites the reader inside. The narrator gives us few clues to help us understand the tones of voice or body language of the speakers; we have to be able to visualize the way that they are speaking to each other to be able to get the whole joke – for example, to know that Peter is speaking with a serious air, but not necessarily truly ‘seriously’, or at least only seriously on one level. Doing this without much help from the narrator makes us feel as if we share the special level of understanding that these two have with each other, and not with the rest of the world. On the other hand, we do not have to know what ‘Barbara celarent darii ferio baralipton’ actually means to understand why his use of it here is funny, we only have to be vaguely aware that ‘barbara’ is a Latin word, not just a name. A middle-class reader who was aspiring upward might have that much knowledge, but would feel as if s/he had more just by virtue of being able to laugh at the same joke these two highly educated characters find funny. Interestingly, although ‘barbara’ is a real Latin word, it is not being used as one in this context. Here it is instead a reference to nonsense words created as mnemonics for students learning formal logic. I was unaware of that myself until I researched it for this project. And yet I had always felt as if I had fully understood the joke, and as if I too were part of their magic circle. I have exactly the right middle-class background to recognize Latin when I hear it, but not enough to be familiar with the mnemonic devices used to teach formal logic at Oxford in the early twentieth century. So Sayers’ class annexation device worked perfectly on me. It may not be a device

that will work equally well on every reader, of course. Alison Light points to Peter Wimsey as one example of the 'adoration which was afforded to all things Oxford between the wars' that made the bourgeois Poirot 'come as a welcome relief' from the snobbery of other writers. She says that 'Christie never risked condescending to or intimidating a reader,' clearly implying that academic references and 'undergraduate humour and mannerism' did exactly that for her, and presumably for other readers as well.¹⁷² But the type of irony Harriet and Peter use does not depend solely on Oxford references, and is common in all the writers I examine, including Christie.

While Peter and Harriet represent perhaps the most sustained example of the ironically bantering couple, all of the authors I examine here use the same speech mannerisms frequently, especially to signal the identity of the hero and heroine of the novel. These two personages often stand out precisely because they talk in this particular way, and are not necessarily well understood by other characters who are slower witted or too earnest. Like Ngaio Marsh's Henry Jernigham and Dinah Copeland, with whom I began this section, or Virginia Revel and Anthony Cade in Christie's *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925), the protagonists of the mystery novels are almost always the best talkers in the book. We have seen this factor at work in Georgette Heyer's mysteries as well. Heyer's romance novel characters are not products of the modernist era except at one remove, since all her romance novels are historical. Many wounded veterans of the Napoleonic Wars can be found in her works, but none of them are embittered, pessimistic, brittle, or effete. Yet almost all her heroes and heroines speak in the same tone of ironic banter that modern mystery characters do, despite having no larger societal reasons to be world-weary and detached. Examining these novels in depth provides a better understanding of the link between irony and the deeper character traits of the Female Gentleman. Because Heyer went on writing immensely popular and frequently imitated romance novels in the same style well into the 1970s, the ironic speech of her Regency characters has been a key factor in carrying on the legacy of the Female Gentleman to contemporary readers.

Despite the frequent comparisons to Jane Austen in blurbs chosen by her publishers,¹⁷³ Heyer's novels do not actually sound much like Austen – the similarities are more in plot than in tone. Because the tone of her characters echoes that of the contemporary milieu of her

first readers, Heyer's novels seem instead like what Austen would have written if she had been alive in 1935. Of course, not every character in a Heyer novel is able to use or even comprehend irony, and this is often the trait that separates the sympathetic characters from the comic butts. In one of Heyer's late novels, *Frederica* (1965), the hero makes an elliptical and ironic statement to the eponymous heroine, and 'as he watched the laughter spring to her eyes he reflected that she had never yet daunted him by asking, fatally: "What do you *mean*?"'¹⁷⁴ Frederica's ability to comprehend him is the key trait that has captured the attention of a hero who is portrayed as terminally bored with life – and we are to sympathize with his boredom, because we are expected to comprehend his remarks with very little more elucidation than Frederica gets herself. This sentence encapsulates in many ways an essential moment between most of Heyer's couples, stretching back to the beginning of her career. And the way that the reader is subtly drawn in and expected to share the same attitudes is consistent from the beginning as well. Even in her earliest novels, Heyer tended to portray the sarcasm of her characters' remarks with only minimal narrative clues such as body language or adverbs ('she said blandly', etc.) – just as in the example from *Strong Poison* above. Like the Victorian conduct manuals and middlebrow novels that taught the reader to become a gentleman by flatteringly addressing him as if he already had the character qualities needed, Heyer's novels promote an ironic and detached sensibility by being enjoyable only if the reader already possesses it to some degree. Since the characters who speak ironically are the hero and heroine, and since there are many dull characters in the novel who do not understand them when they speak, when we do understand them, we are instantly transported inside the magic circle of the elect.

According to Jane Aiken Hodge, Heyer herself said that her heroes came in two types, Mark I: 'the brusque, savage sort with a foul temper' and Mark II: 'suave, well-dressed, rich, and a famous whip'.¹⁷⁵ Hodge extends this bipolar schema to the heroines, and I too will do so, along a different axis than Hodge's. Heyer commonly polarizes her romance novels between youthful heroines who are romantic, impulsive, and emotional, and somewhat older ones who are practical, competent, and far less sentimental. In the early novels, such as *Devil's Cub* or *The Talisman Ring*, the two heroines are given roughly equal plot time in the course of the story, but the narrative

voice clearly indicates that the unromantic woman is the one with whom the reader is expected to sympathize. Later in Heyer's career, the romantic ingénue gradually becomes a secondary figure, when she appears at all, and is only a foil for the commonsensical, ironic heroine. This progression is the clearest indication of Heyer's strong thematic commitment to rationalism; the romantic heroines are always the targets of the narrator's comedy, at least mildly, and by contrast the less emotional, less impulsive women, who are self-controlled and generally good in a crisis, are the most desirable kind of person to be.

The novel that establishes this contrast most strongly is *The Talisman Ring* (1936), which is in many ways a transitional novel between Heyer's two favorite forms, romances and mysteries, and also between her early period of romances set in the eighteenth century, and her later period of Regency romances. It has two coequal heroines, one of each of the types I have described above. Eustacie de Vauban is young, impetuous, romantic, and French. She has been rescued by her English grandfather from the Terror, but regrets it, because she thinks it would have been very romantic to have gone to the guillotine 'in a tumbrel, dressed all in white, pale, but *quite* unafraid, and not attending to the *canaille* at all'.¹⁷⁶ Her foil is Sarah Thane, a woman in her late twenties who is accustomed to managing her brother's household, is competent and collected, and who pretends successfully to Eustacie throughout the whole novel that she is just as romantic as the younger woman is, although she is not. Sarah is able to pretend because she has completely mastered subtle irony; and because readers are meant to catch all her irony, we are automatically put in the position of agreeing with Sarah that Eustacie is a bit immature, if charming; therefore we prefer Sarah to Eustacie. The more mature hero of the piece, Sir Tristram Shield, expresses his contempt for Eustacie's romanticism openly, which only antagonizes her, whereas Sarah retains the younger woman's confidence even while being able to direct her into more sensible actions during the murder investigation they are all caught up in. Unlike many Heyer novels with two female leads, the plot focuses equally on Eustacie and Sarah, and each achieves a happy marriage at the end, to a man with a matching temperament (Eustacie marries her romantic cousin Ludovic, and Sarah marries Sir Tristram). Nevertheless, we watch Eustacie and Ludovic off the stage with a pleasure which is, at best,

indulgent, and the narrative clearly expects us to inhabit Sarah's point of view.

This interaction can be seen well in the following passage, in which the four characters discuss a possible way of proving Ludovic's innocence of a murder, by finding a secret panel in a country house:

'Go where?' demanded Sir Tristram.

'Oh, to the Dower House!' replied Ludovic airily. 'There's a secret panel. You wouldn't know it.'

'A secret panel?' repeated Miss Thane in an awed voice. 'You mean actually a secret panel?'

Ludovic regarded her in some slight concern. 'Yes, why not?'

'I thought it too good to be true,' said Miss Thane. 'If there is one thing above all others I have wanted all my life to do it is to search for a secret panel! I suppose,' she added hopefully, 'it would be too much to expect to find an underground passage leading from the secret panel?'

Eustacie clasped her hands ecstatically. 'But yes, of course! An underground passage –'

'With bats and dead men's bones,' shuddered Miss Thane.¹⁷⁷

After further discussion of the supposed passage, which Ludovic admits does not exist:

'If there is not a passage we must do without one,' decreed Eustacie stoutly. 'One must be practical. *Tout même* it is a pity there is not a passage. I thought it would lead from the Court to the Dower House. It would have been *magnifique!* We might have found treasure!'

'That is precisely what I was thinking,' agreed Miss Thane. 'An old iron chest, full of jewels.'

Sir Tristram broke in on these fancies with a somewhat withering comment. 'Since we are not searching for treasure, and no passage exists save in your imaginations, this discussion is singularly unprofitable.'¹⁷⁸

Throughout this conversation, it is clear to the reader that Sarah does not really believe in the Gothic elements of Eustacie's fantasies. But while it seems obvious while one is reading, in fact it is difficult to

isolate specific words used by the narrator or Miss Thane to convey that impression. Only the fact that she is excessively entranced, using an 'awed voice' and asking 'hopefully' about the passage, hints that she is not really taken in. She enters into Eustacie's embellishments about treasure, even extending them, while Sir Tristram cuts them off. Because she has done this, a little later she is able to distract Ludovic from trying to break into the Dower House himself, which would be very dangerous: "A very proper resolve," approved Miss Thane, before Sir Tristram could condemn it. "But something a trifle disturbing has occurred to me: are you sure that your cousin would have kept the ring?"¹⁷⁹ Sir Tristram understands her perfectly at all times, just as Frederica never has to ask 'what do you *mean*?' and Harriet and Peter never need to explain their remarks to each other. Eventually, he even adopts more of her tone and attitude toward the younger couple, so that Sarah Thane's worldview dominates the book. With her mix of irony and sympathy, emotion and common sense, Sarah is the prototype for the majority of Heyer's later heroines, and a Female Gentleman par excellence.¹⁸⁰

The kind of light irony that pervades the middlebrow mystery novels of the interwar period is not present in high modernist literature. Of course, it is typical to see modernist literature as inherently ironic in many ways. In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell opens his analysis of the effects of World War I on literature of the period and just after with a chapter on situational irony. From Thomas Hardy's poems published just before the war, through many examples of poetry, memoir, and actual historical events, Fussell shows how the war itself, and especially the advance on the Somme in 1916, embodied the 'human disillusion' that is typical of situational irony.¹⁸¹ Similarly, in his discussion of the basic tenets of modernist art, Andreas Huyssen lists 'self-referential, self-conscious, frequently ironic, ambiguous, and rigorously experimental' as the traits that modernist literature used self-consciously to create the 'great divide' between itself and the mass culture it despised as dangerously feminine.¹⁸² This self-referential irony is related to the rational 'detachment' Marianne DeKoven sees as part of the masculine side of modernism.¹⁸³ I myself have been arguing that the irony with which the Female Gentleman speaks is one of the traits that make her a gentle'man'. Huyssen's whole project in *After the Great Divide* is to problematize modernism's othering of mass culture, and

ultimately I wish to do the same. However, the technique of irony is one area in which the modernists and the mass culture they feared really were dissimilar. Both situational and self-referential irony are very different from the kind of verbal and dramatic irony that underlies witty banter and creates a charmed inner circle between narrator, reader, and certain elect characters.

Although most canonical modernist writers did not employ the light irony that is common in Female Gentleman novels and, for that matter, in twenty-first-century American conversation, Simon Joyce has recently identified a similar phenomenon to be found 'on the fringes of modernism'.¹⁸⁴ In *Victorians in the Rearview Mirror*, Joyce describes how the second generation, typified by Evelyn Waugh, began in the 1920s to idealize Victorian aesthetics as a form of kitsch – rejecting the rejection of the Victorian that the irony of the Great War engendered in the first wave of modernist writers. Joyce minutely analyzes the instability of their liking for 'camp appropriation and bricolage' and the way that this pose, adopted for shock value, could always almost slip over the edge into sincerity.¹⁸⁵ The kind of irony that leads to camp is unstable, and this attitude is much closer to what is found in the middlebrow writers of the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, Susan Rowland draws attention to the frequency with which Ngaio Marsh sets her novels in an exaggerated 'camp country house', and she argues that 'theatricality and self-conscious artifice' are one of the signal features of the Golden Age mystery.¹⁸⁶ When Henry Jernigham finally proposes to Dinah Copeland near the end of *Overture to Death*, he does so in mock-Victorian language, and she replies in kind: 'I may not deny, Mr. Jernigham, that my sensibilities; nay, since I will not dissemble, my affections are touched by this declaration. I cannot hear you unmoved.'¹⁸⁷ This elaborately Victorian speech is almost campy. Middlebrow women novelists, like Waugh and other minor modernists, rejected the rejection of the Victorian, to different ends, by re-purposing that era's most iconic concept.

In so doing, they created a mode of speaking which has survived and pervaded many other forms of cultural production beyond the mystery novel. Their signature ironic banter is now the lingua franca of every blog and sitcom. While I claimed above to have difficulty isolating words to show the ironic tone of Peter Wimsey or Sarah Thane, one can easily imagine how to read the passages aloud. The tone of voice and body language needed to convey Miss Thane's

slight sarcasm (present only through her breathless exaggeration) would be easy for a contemporary person who frequently uses the same technique of deadpan irony in everyday conversation. In movie versions of either novel, no alterations would have to be made to the dialogue to make it sound as if it had been written today; *The Talisman Ring*, set in the 1790s, would be no more of a 'period piece' to today's viewer than it would have been to a reader of 1936. One can hardly imagine saying the same of *Ulysses* or *Mrs Dalloway*.

In Heyer's novels, the control of emotion and the ability to present a detached and ironic face to the world are aspects of courage, and signal a mature or admirable character. Though her novels often depict such traits as rare in women, they are clearly presented as the ideal. The link between courage, honor, and emotional control is clearest in *Devil's Cub*. Mary Challoner, the gentlemanly heroine who shoots her future husband to prevent him from raping her during an abduction, is presented throughout the novel as not only courageous, but also phlegmatic and emotionally controlled. She is contrasted with Vidal's cousin Juliana Marling. Juliana is romantic, and has quarreled with her own suitor because he was not willing to enact the role she expected of a man, specifically being unwilling to elope with her. For her, elopement is the ultimate romantic act. Juliana finds herself riding with Vidal in pursuit of Mary and her own suitor, who have eloped with each other because of a series of misunderstandings. She is fractious with Vidal and irritates him by complaining about the conditions of the journey, and he rebukes her by comparing her very mild sufferings to what Mary underwent at his own hands during her abduction, and pointing out that even under those conditions, she never 'treated me to the vapours, as you seem like to do'. When Juliana retorts that Mary must therefore be 'a dull creature with no nerves at all' Vidal treats her to a detailed and chilling description of what he had done to Mary, including threatening Juliana with physical violence:

'You think it was vastly romantic for Mary to be carried off by me, don't you? You think you would enjoy it, and you cannot conceive how she should be afraid, can you? Then think, my girl! Think a little! You are in my power at this moment, I may remind you. What if I make you feel it? What if I say to start with that you *shall* eat your dinner, and force it down your throat?'

Juliana shrank back from him involuntarily. 'Don't, Vidal! Don't come near me!' she said, frightened by the expression in his face. He laughed. 'Not so romantic, is it, Ju?'¹⁸⁸

Note that Vidal condemns Juliana's romanticism and attempts to shake her out of it by adjuring her to 'think'; later he blames her attitude, and her earlier complaints about the dinner and the carriage, on her 'sensibilities'. Mary, he thinks, has just as much sensibility as Juliana, but he declares flatly that 'Mary would have died sooner than let me see that she was afraid.'¹⁸⁹ Vidal gives Mary credit for having deep emotions, and his ability to enter into them well enough to explain them to Juliana (who was Mary's friend at school, and who therefore ought to know her better than Vidal) is the very trait that makes him the right man for her, despite his violence.

Vidal is the most extreme of Heyer's Mark II heroes, the biggest rake who needs the most reform, and this scene could easily be repellent in its savagery.¹⁹⁰ It is also, however, an accurate reflection of one of the keynotes of the modern period. Vidal has a roiling emotional depth that he covers with the pose of a devil-may-care dandy – put him in a top hat and monocle and give him a responsibility complex and World War I flashbacks, and he could be Lord Peter Wimsey. For such a man, only a woman with both emotional depth and complete control over those emotions can be a good match, lest the emotions get out of control and 'blow up' like the bombs and mines so many postwar men saw in their nightmares. *Devil's Cub* veers between emphasizing Vidal's dangerous violence, and portraying him as a spoiled boy who needs to be managed, but the woman who manages him successfully has to be phlegmatic herself to avoid triggering his explosive temper. Mary Challoner, therefore, must possess exactly those traits that other novelists of the interwar years found ideal for women, and she is a Female Gentleman of Heyer's own day, rather than of the period in which the novel is set.

4

Conclusion: Assessing the Female Gentleman

Mary Challoner's modernity brings us full circle, then, back to the question of the social value and impact of the 'Female Gentleman'. Is this a positive feminist ideal, or should a critic place more emphasis on the pessimistic view that middlebrow novelists had contempt for the sex in general and expected very few women to live up to the ideal? Can the gentlemanly ideal be disentangled from its class baggage? What, if any, impact does the model of the Female Gentleman have on twenty-first-century readers of these novels? These questions can be combined into one issue: the extent to which the concept of the 'Female Gentleman' might simply be dated beyond usability by its reliance on social distinctions that contemporary Anglophone societies have ostensibly left behind. Can a twenty-first-century woman really adopt as an ideal of behavior the same model theoretically held by Victorian imperialists who expected their wives to be domestic angels? If I am correct about the project that middlebrow writers were undertaking after World War I – freeing the word gentleman from its class and gender restrictions – they had a monumental task to accomplish, and their own attitudes toward class and race were ambiguous enough to give a reader who admires their goals pause. Yet there is value in their conception of feminism that cannot simply be discarded, either.

In answering these questions it is helpful to return to the critical history of genres with which I began this book. The detective novel has generally been regarded as conservative in its essential narrative form. A world of order is disturbed by a criminal act of violence, and the orderly society is restored in the end by the actions of the

detective. Some scholars have argued that female Golden Age novelists were more prone to breaking the rules of the genre than male ones,¹ and that this makes their novels less conservative than other detective fiction. But such an argument leaves untouched the original premise that the detective genre is inherently conservative. The romance novel has come in for even more excoriating criticism than the mystery novel, typified by Germaine Greer's famous comment in *The Female Eunuch* that the romance novel represents 'women cherishing the chains of their bondage'.² Janice Radway argues in a more nuanced way that romance novels fill vicariously the emotional needs that can never be fulfilled in real life under patriarchy, and by doing so, they prevent women from realizing how unsatisfied they are, staving off any possible revolution in social organization.³ As I argued in Chapter 1, Radway makes a structurally similar claim in her analysis of middlebrow novels, which serve the same purpose for middle-class knowledge workers as romance novels do for women.⁴

While I have endorsed this view of middlebrow fiction up to a point, it has its limitations. For example, it unreasonably singles out so-called genre fiction; if an orderly ending is a sign of conservatism, then almost all literature is conservative, not just the detective novel or historical romance.⁵ On the other hand, if one chooses instead to emphasize the selectivity of the narrative's orderliness – which values are reinstated and which ones are challenged by the ending – then any novel of any genre might work any ideology, and one must make individual judgments. Discussions of the ideological conservatism of middlebrow novels also overly privilege endings, in a subversion/containment model that discounts the middles of narratives.⁶ More fundamentally, it is not necessary to figure the plot movement as one of order–destabilization–order at all. In a theory that I would extend to detective fiction, Pamela Regis argues that romance novels are a type of comedy in the classical or Shakespearean sense; the beginning of the narrative portrays a corrupt society, and the marriage of hero and heroine symbolizes the renovation or reform of that society, in which 'the heroine's freedom, however provisional, is a victory'.⁷ On those terms, the destabilization of the middle of the novel makes space for an affirmative model that opposes the corrupt values of the old society, and the ending merely chooses which model to establish with its orderly closure.⁸ That is exactly what Female Gentleman novels do; they present an alternative model of

female behavior, one which is not recontained by the ending, but confirmed by it as a 'victory'.

Feminist analyses of detective novels have begun to recognize this alternate vision of the genre's politics. Single-author studies of Agatha Christie, in particular, have devoted themselves to rescuing her from her image as 'Mrs. Average Conservative Housewife'.⁹ Merja Makinen charts the progress of feminist Christie criticism from outright dismissal in the 1980s to ever more complex reconsiderations in the 1990s and 2000s. Makinen's view, like that of many other recent feminist critics, is that Christie engaged in 'quiet but sustained subversion'.¹⁰ I would add that this is the best kind of subversion, because it is the most likely to work. But despite the growing influence of feminist criticism on studies of particular authors or subgroups of detective fiction, the generalized idea of the detective novel as inherently conservative is still common, and it is not hard to see why. Though it might be theoretically flawed to label entire genres with a certain political bent, it is impossible to ignore the way most of the specific novels I have examined in this study employed lower-class characters only as 'props and stereotypes'.¹¹ Allingham, Marsh, and Heyer occasionally attempted to draw portraits of more three-dimensional lower-class characters late in their careers, after drastic changes in the makeup of English society had made it impossible not to change with the times. But all of these authors were writing novels with feminist possibilities even during the interwar period in which political feminism was experiencing a backlash. This would fit the Golden Age novelists into the Virginia Woolf pattern; undoubtedly a feminist, Woolf was also well aware that her vision was limited by social class assumptions she could not escape – one study of class politics in modernism takes its title from her own self-critical query 'Am I a snob?'¹²

In some cases it is possible to defend Woolf's contemporary authors from charges of snobbery. When reading criticism of Sayers and Allingham in particular it is striking how often passages are cited as straight examples of the author's conservative class or gender politics, when they should actually be taken ironically – for example, this passage from *Strong Poison* in which Wimsey considers venting his frustration violently by smashing a mirror, then reconsiders: 'Silly! One could not do that. The inherited inhibitions of twenty civilised centuries tied one hand and foot in bonds of ridicule. What

if he did smash the mirror? Nothing would happen. Bunter would come in, unmoved and unsurprised, would sweep up the debris in a dust-pan.¹³ Lee Horsley reads Wimsey's inhibitions as a sign that 'class and hierarchy' are an 'indispensable fence against barbaric acts',¹⁴ but such a reading is only possible if one discounts the pervasively ironic tone of Sayers' writing. Free indirect discourse gives us access to Wimsey's interior thought processes overlaid with the author's own shaping agenda; both Wimsey and Sayers figure class-bound standards of behavior as limiting, not admirable. His inhibition here is presented as a crippling disability, emotionally related to his shell shock. This passage is a prime example of what Susan Rowland argues is a '*self-critical* depiction of social class embedded in the genre'.¹⁵ I would argue that many readers who find Sayers, Christie, or Allingham too conservative are similarly not giving enough weight to the irony of the passages they quote in support of their claims.

Dorothy Sayers has been the most difficult of the classic British detective authors to categorize politically. It is easy to hail her as a feminist writer because of her biography, which has guaranteed her the label of 'New Woman' from many commentators, and because her novels consistently demonstrate the basic belief that women should have professional and personal choices as broad as a man's. She has, however, almost as frequently been judged wanting by feminist literary critics, most of whom focus on Harriet's marriage to Peter in *Busman's Honeymoon* as a betrayal of a feminist agenda expressed in the earlier Wimsey/Vane novels.¹⁶ Elizabeth A. Trembley and others have argued that Sayers is a 'humanist' rather than a feminist,¹⁷ because of her rejection of the 'aggressive feminism' of the suffragists.¹⁸ As I noted in Chapter 1, Sayers disliked the idea of categories altogether, considering them to be a danger to society that when taken too far could lead to 'force and dictatorship' and a 'totalitarian State'.¹⁹ To ward off fascism she believed that all people should be considered as completely separate individuals, and this was a common view among young professional women between the wars.²⁰ Thus Sayers' novels abound in individual women who are silly and inferior, as well as those who hold professional jobs and live competent lives.²¹ An ideal of gentlemanliness that could be equally aspired to by both sexes would seem to be a perfect solution for Sayers, and for the interwar culture for which she was writing.

One can, however, see the relative lack of women who succeed in reaching the ideal as an example of the pessimism Nicola Humble argues that the middlebrow novel had for its feminist ideals. Is the rarity of the fully human woman in Sayers' novels an example of a 'combination of a notional feminist politics with an almost visceral contempt for women in general'?²² Agatha Christie's novels also frequently include honorable and courageous women whom every male character insists on saying is exceptional, one in a thousand. But it is more accurate to see Sayers and Christie not as pessimists, but as true inheritors of Mary Wollstonecraft, who insisted that human virtue for men and women alike was based on reason, or John Stuart Mill, who would not commit to saying that women were equal or superior, only that there was no evidence either way until women had been given perfect freedom to prove themselves. Sayers' essay 'The Human-Not-Quite-Human' almost uncannily echoes many of the arguments and even the rhetorical tropes of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which I believe must have been an influence on the religiously founded argument of individualistic feminism Sayers makes in that essay. Sayers' ideal that every person be an individual and not a member of a category should also be judged in the context of the rising fascist threat of the 1930s; McGregor and Lewis argue that Sayers' belief that 'no one should be slotted into an occupation, a position, or a marriage because of his or her sex, class, or racial background', was her answer 'both to the fascists and to the traditional English who would shove women back onto the Victorian pedestal'.²³ Sayers' linkage of Nazism with women's issues can also be seen in one of her letters, in which she argues that the kind of feminism that slots women into a category of superiority to men is just as dangerous as fascism.²⁴ Agatha Christie makes a different but compatible connection between fascism and individualism in *N or M?*, a Tommy and Tuppence thriller from early in World War II (see discussion in Chapter 3). The Nazi spy tries to recruit Tuppence based on her exceptionality. Tuppence rejects his appeals, but not her own individuality. The spy N is convinced that there is a 'best *type* of Englishmen'²⁵ who are superior to the rest – that is, a category of superior people. Tuppence refuses to be part of this category.

The threat of fascism and the celebration of individuality it occasioned may seem remote to us now, but the underlying principle of

the rejection of labels and categories has application well beyond the 1930s. The androgyny favored by Sayers and other authors of the period has a psychological resonance today as well. Sayers' novels in particular can be read through the lens of performativity, as deconstructions of the 'hegemonic vocabularies' and 'scripts' of gendered identity.²⁶ Harriet Vane is especially androgynous, and Elizabeth A. Trembley celebrates *Busman's Honeymoon* for showing Harriet and Peter equally changing their characters in 'the maturity of androgyny'.²⁷ Sayers explicitly discussed androgyny in her essay 'The Human-Not-Quite-Human',²⁸ providing a link between her and Virginia Woolf – and, indeed, Carolyn Heilbrun, whose thoughts on androgyny in mystery novels I recounted in Chapter 1. The recasting of the ultimate Victorian hegemonic vocabulary word, 'gentleman', as a gender-neutral signifier, is the most sweeping example of Sayers' desire to rewrite the scripts of gender.

Ngaio Marsh's politics are more complicated to label than those of any other author of the period. Reading through the collection of papers delivered at the celebration of her centenary in 1995, in New Zealand and by New Zealand scholars (some of whom knew her personally), one gains the distinct impression that New Zealanders love Marsh but wish she had been less Anglophilic, more self-consciously colonial. Her decision to write mysteries is part of this problem for them. One critic describes the classic mystery novel as a locus of Catherine Belsey's 'Ideology of liberal humanism' and sees Marsh as 'subscrib[ing] to the liberal enshrinement of the sovereign individual: the free, unified and autonomous selfhood celebrated in much English culture',²⁹ while another claims that many New Zealanders regret Marsh's failure to be a cultural activist, accusing her of 'cultural fraudulence, that she replicated Englishness at a time when she should have been inventing New Zealandness'.³⁰ However, it is difficult to understand exactly what Marsh is being charged with. Her use of outsider characters like Alleyn or Roberta Grey as a device to allow her to criticize 'English racist residues or colonial identities' is an equally commonly cited feature of her writing, one that clearly stems from her New Zealand roots.³¹ As I argued in Chapter 1, Agatha Christie uses the Belgian detective Hercule Poirot in the same way, frequently putting explicit or indirect critical comments on English attitudes in his mouth.

More importantly, it is questionable at best to label as 'too English' or 'too ideological' the idea of free and autonomous selfhood.

Catherine Belsey argues that ‘classic realism’ produces such a subjectivity because a capitalist society requires ‘subjects who work by themselves’, and that a narrative technique that constructs a reader in such a subjectivity is performing the ideological work of capitalism.³² The close reading of tone in Heyer’s *The Talisman Ring* that I offered in Chapter 3 does uncannily resemble Belsey’s explanations of the narrative technique of *Bleak House* and other Victorian literature;³³ indeed, all these novels use carefully modulated irony to maintain a separation between the reader and characters, and thus the technique that Radway calls ‘middlebrow personalism’³⁴ is essentially pedagogical, as I argued in Chapter 1. However, it is difficult to imagine how any literature that was more than mere escapism or pure abstract expressionism could operate in any manner other than the pedagogical. Ideological work will always be performed, and to reject any novel simply because one has noticed the performance is a rapidly self-defeating reflex. Instead, we must concern ourselves with naming and judging that work specifically: is the subjectivity that it offers *valuable*? The nineteenth-century gentleman was a free and autonomous self, circumscribed only by class and gender. Female Gentleman novels widen the magic circle, removing the boundary of gender and enlarging the boundary of class, but they do so, paradoxically, by more firmly entrenching the boundaries that remain; the thrill of exclusivity is the kick propelling the swimmer off the wall of the pool. Is that tradeoff ‘worth it’? Perhaps an answer of No explains why Gill Plain is convinced that ‘The extent to which the term feminist can be applied to Christie is uncertain’ even though ‘the assumption underlying her interwar fiction is one of female agency. Women can, and they do.’³⁵ Female agency *is* feminism, even if one does not believe in agency; but perhaps feminism is not enough.

The tradeoff between class and gender leads us back to the final vexed question for the ‘Female Gentleman’ – can the concept have any use today, or is it too bound up with the politics of a thankfully departed time? This can perhaps best be answered by revisiting the issue of optimistic versus pessimistic feminism. New Woman novels were feminist, but deeply pessimistic. Interwar middlebrow novels have also been seen as pessimistic because they endorsed an ideal of female behavior that they found precious few women embodying. Certainly, these novels depict more women in their pages who fail to measure up to their gentlemanly standard than they do women

who succeed. But I would argue that this view emphasizes the wrong aspect. Every one of these authors also includes hope for the future: the ever-expanding enrollment of undergraduates who will learn honor in *Gaudy Night*, the infusions of colonial or middle-class women who are more gentlemanly than their upper-class sisters in Marsh's novels, the promise, at the end of every Heyer and many Marsh, Christie, or Allingham novels, of a second generation to be raised by the hero and heroine with the newer, better values they represent. Each of these authors may show the gentlemanly ideal as being far from universal in her own time, but each at least gestures toward the future, toward the expansion of gentlemanliness beyond its traditional preserves, as the magic circle continues to widen. In that sense, today's readers, three or four generations removed from British authors of the modernist period, are inheritors of a broadening legacy. Every woman today who reads Sayers, and says 'Of *course* we must have love with honor, an honor of the mind as well as an honor of the body – that's obvious!' represents a success of the gentlemanly ideal.

One of the aspects of Female Gentlemanliness that is likely to be most troubling to modern feminists is the unfortunate class connotations of the term 'gentleman'. Feminism has often sustained the accusation of being elitist, since at least the beginning of the organized suffrage movement in the nineteenth century. Certainly, white middle-class feminism is the main line of its development until the 'third wave' focus on racial and class intersections with gender. The Female Gentleman's immediate progenitor, the New Woman, was particularly troubling in this regard. New Woman intellectuals like Olive Schreiner and Eleanor Marx were both feminists and socialists, but mainstream socialism 'did not welcome "the Woman Question"',³⁶ while feminists were often classically liberal individualists who did not believe in collectivism. Moreover, many suffragists were concerned only with advancing their own rights and not those of workers, either through outright class elitism or through narrow self-interest. Thus the movements conflicted bitterly over, for example, the 1890s factory acts that limited the number of hours women could work: the socialists saw them as advancing protection of workers, while the suffragists saw them as shutting women out of the labor market.³⁷ Similarly, New Women were just as often complicit in as they were resistant to the project of imperialism and the racial ideology that went with it.³⁸

I will be the first to admit that Female Gentleman novels embody the same issues in the same way. Charles Rzepka might stand in for any reader of the 2000s; in a sensitive and sympathetic reading of Sayers, he argues that her characters show how to ‘rehabilitate the idea of social responsibility’ inherent in *noblesse oblige* while admitting that the actual class system of aristocracy is gone – to revive the concepts of gentlemanliness without the elitism, as I have argued the genre as a whole does. But in the midst of this argument he is derailed by her ‘anti-Semitism’ and use of racial epithets.³⁹ The casual racism found in many of these novels has long troubled modern readers – I vividly remember a graduate-school professor of mine who said he couldn’t read Sayers because she was too ‘anti-Semitic’. Marsh, perhaps because of her colonial origins, presents less of a challenge to modern sensibilities. There are some distasteful class moments in her novels, but they are overtly anti-racist, and several novels set in New Zealand condemn prejudice against the Maori. Christie allowed her characters of the 1920s and 1930s to call someone ‘white’ as a form of character testimonial – for example, ‘Despard’s a white man, and I don’t believe he’s ever been a murderer’⁴⁰ in a novel from 1936 – a formulation rejected by Marsh in *Vintage Murder*, in which her detective Alleyn becomes ‘heartily tired’ of the phrase ‘white man’.⁴¹ In 1931, Margery Allingham allowed a very elderly woman to speak with horror of her brother-in-law having married a colonial woman whose ‘touch of the tarbrush’ results in a child who is ‘a blackamoor’. While the narrator assures us that Campion views her attitude as being one that belongs to ‘a Society of sixty years before’, this is hardly the full-blooded condemnation of racism that today’s reader would hope to find.⁴² But such incidents have to be balanced with others. Christie frequently made sarcastic and critical comments on insular Englishness through the mouth of her Belgian detective Poirot, and Sayers portrayed actual Jewish and black characters with sympathy and even, in some cases, sensitivity – for example, the victim in her first novel, *Whose Body?* (1923), a Jewish financier who is murdered because of anti-Semitic prejudice on the part of the man whom he defeated in love 30 years before; or the black preacher Hallelujah Dawson in *Unnatural Death* (originally published as *The Dawson Pedigree*, 1927), whom the real murderer attempts to frame by invoking English color prejudice.

While the charge of racism can be defended in a limited way, the paradox of the Female Gentleman remains troubling. Dorothy Sayers is almost universally agreed to be the most conservative of the Big Four, and at the same time she was clearly the most consistently and explicitly feminist author in the group – the only one who wrote published essays with titles like ‘Are Women Human?’ It may seem that all I have done is tell, with new details, the same old story of women getting ahead on the backs of their servants. Susan Rowland describes *Gaudy Night* as embodying ‘a progressive feminism eschewing the radical’, and indeed this description could accurately apply to most of the novels and novelists I have examined.⁴³ These writers, as Carla Kungl puts it, ‘negotiated’ with their culture;⁴⁴ they did not try to create a revolution. But evolution is as powerful a force as revolution, and considerably less dangerous for all concerned. At the end of Christie’s *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925), the hero Anthony Cade departs to rule over the fictional kingdom of Herzoslovakia, with his English bride Virginia at his side. Cade was a socialist and revolutionary in his youth, and he wants to bring democracy to Herzoslovakia, but he believes that in the present state of human development, the only way to do that is through monarchy. He says to Superintendent Battle:

‘There’s damned little equality going about. Mind you, I still believe in democracy. But you’ve got to force it on people with a strong hand – ram it down their throats. Men don’t want to be brothers – they may some day, but they don’t now. My belief in the Brotherhood of Man died the day I arrived in London last week, when I observed the people standing in a Tube train resolutely refuse to move up and make room for those who entered. ... I still believe in the Brotherhood of Man, but it’s not coming yet awhile. Say another ten thousand years or so. It’s no good being impatient. Evolution is a slow process.’⁴⁵

Battle’s response to this speech is to tell him that he will be a good king.

Evolutionary change is more practical and realistic than revolutionary change, and fewer eggs have to be broken to make the omelet. Despite the undeniable anachronisms in the Female Gentleman’s novelistic surroundings, the character type expresses a strand of

feminism that has been dominant in many periods of women's history. The Female Gentleman is the emblem of the individualistic, libertarian feminism of Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, and indeed of the post-suffragist generation to which the middlebrow authors all belonged. Dorothy Sayers, Ngaio Marsh, Agatha Christie, and Margery Allingham were able to give their protagonists what Charlotte Brontë was not able to allow Jane Eyre to have, what Wilkie Collins might not even have been consciously trying to let Rachel Verinder be, what Mona Caird could not imagine giving Hadria Fullerton. Harriet Vane, Agatha Troy, Tuppence Beresford, and Amanda Fitton all become fully realized, professionally successful, economically independent, and emotionally stable women who happen to love men, who treat their personal relationships with the same honor they do their professional responsibilities. The word 'gentleman' carried connotations in 1930 that made it useful to appropriate for the defense of individuality from fascism; middlebrow writers were able to use the influence of past values to authorize their modern concepts of human equality. That particular act of philosophical acrobatics may no longer be possible; 'gentleman' cannot be a neutral word for people of the twenty-first century. But the voice and the honor – the courage, competence, emotional restraint, and ironic tone – of the Female Gentleman are so much like today's that I believe the concept can survive, if the word cannot. In my experience, people of today, male and female, in London and America, do make way for others who are getting onto a subway train – at least some of the time. In fact, they often act like gentlemen, and perhaps the Sisterhood of Man is owed in part to the Female Gentleman.

Notes

A note on editions: All of the novels cited in this book have been reprinted numerous times in both British and American editions. I have used whatever printing I have been able to procure – generally a cheap American paperback, since I am American – and have given the full publication information of that edition in a note, with the original date of publication and original British title (if different) in the main text.

1 Introduction: Middlebrow Women and Detective Fiction

1. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon* (New York: HarperPaperbacks, 1995), 308, emphasis in the original.
2. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Theories of Representation and Difference (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 49.
3. The term Golden Age is highly contested among scholars of detective fiction. While it is certainly subjective and possibly even trivializing, most alternatives are awkward. I will therefore use 'Golden Age' interchangeably with the term 'classic detective fiction', another common designation.
4. Literature is frequently argued to have played an outsized role in this transition; for example, Arlene Young argues that Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* was instrumental in successfully attacking the older aristocratic code of gentlemanliness based on birth and martial prowess, especially the code of dueling. See *Culture, Class, and Gender in the Victorian Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 22–4. Scholarship on middlebrow novels assigns a similarly important role to novels in the ideological work of class transformation between the wars.
5. Robin Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 14.
6. In this dating I have followed Nicola Humble, whose study *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s* (Oxford University Press, 2001) has shaped my own thinking considerably. She argues that the dislocations of World War II took some time to be fully realized in British culture, and that the middlebrow novels of the 1950s have a 'valedictory note' (p. 4 n. 7). That is certainly borne out in the works of my authors; by 1955, Dorothy Sayers had stopped writing fiction, Georgette Heyer abandoned novels set in her own period and turned entirely to historical romances, and most of the other writers wrote books that seem almost to be parodies of their prewar styles before turning to more resolutely modern topics in subsequent novels. Examples include Allingham's *The Beckoning*

- Lady* (1955), Heyer's *Detection Unlimited* (1953), and Marsh's *Scales of Justice* (1955).
7. For discussion of the effect of canon formation on the gendering of literary modernism, see Bonnie Kime Scott's introduction to her groundbreaking anthology *The Gender of Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
 8. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 1, *The War of the Words* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 233, 37.
 9. Marianne DeKoven, *Rich and Strange: Gender, History, Modernism* (Princeton University Press, 1991), 8. For further discussion of the debate on modernism's gender, see Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 23–5.
 10. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, ix.
 11. Ariela Freedman, *Death, Men, and Modernism: Trauma and Narrative in British Fiction from Hardy to Woolf*, *Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory Outstanding Dissertations* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 21.
 12. Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 197.
 13. Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 38.
 14. A 1990 list of bestselling authors (as measured by library loans) in Britain, reproduced by Clive Bloom as Appendix 6 of *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction since 1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), names Agatha Christie among the top ten adult fiction authors, and Margery Allingham, Georgette Heyer, and Ngaio Marsh among the top 100. Stephen Knight claims in *Crime Fiction, 1800–2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* that over a billion Agatha Christie novels had been sold as of 2004 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), x.
 15. Alzina Stone Dale makes this assertion about Sayers categorically in the introduction to *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Centenary Celebration* (New York: Walker, 1993), xi. Such evidence is more difficult to come by for the other authors, but my personal experience of bookstore and library shelves extends back to the ends of most of their careers.
 16. Bloom, *Bestsellers*, 85.
 17. Bloom, *Bestsellers*, 21.
 18. 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).
 19. David Castronovo, *The English Gentleman: Images and Ideals in Literature and Society* (New York: Ungar, 1987), 8.
 20. Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman*, 8.
 21. Karen Volland Waters, *The Perfect Gentleman: Masculine Control in Victorian Men's Fiction, 1870–1901* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 29.
 22. Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman*, 183.
 23. Sean Latham, *'Am I a Snob?' Modernism and the Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 4.

24. For the role of public school or university education in nineteenth-century gentlemanliness, see Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman*, 8; Castronovo, *The English Gentleman*, 59–61; and Waters, *The Perfect Gentleman*, 18–19.
25. Quoted in Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), xii.
26. Virginia Woolf, 'Middlebrow', in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942), 184.
27. Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith, eds, *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Writers of the 1920s* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 1, 4.
28. Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 14.
29. Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, 2nd edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 128. See his Chapter 4, 'A Conservative Canon', for further discussion of the reading habits of working-class readers.
30. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, 126.
31. Woolf, 'Middlebrow', 183.
32. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, 132.
33. Woolf, 'Middlebrow', 183.
34. The advertising and marketing campaign for the Book-of-the-Month Club emphasized the desirability of being 'au courant' and sounding good at dinner parties. See Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 98–106.
35. Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War, 1919–1939* (Providence, RI: Berg, 1993), 12–13.
36. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 13.
37. Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 283.
38. For discussion of the variety of types of novels to be found on the Book-of-the-Month Club lists, see Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 279.
39. Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 2, 4.
40. See, for example, Alison Light, who describes detective fiction as a place 'where "middlebrow" and "highbrow" could meet' (*Forever England*, 162).
41. Bloom, *Bestsellers*, 21.
42. Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 15.
43. Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 88.
44. Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 284.
45. Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 88–9.
46. Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 65.
47. Jaime Harker, 'Progressive Middlebrow: Dorothy Canfield, Women's Magazines, and Popular Feminism in the Twenties', in *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Writers of the 1920s*, ed. Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 112.
48. See, for example, Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith, who argue in their introduction to *Middlebrow Moderns* that the American middlebrow was subversive precisely through its focus on emotion: 'middlebrow female novelists argued that the personal was indeed political, elevating

- the feminized culture of feeling as a forum for change over the masculinized sphere of politics' (10).
49. Jaime Harker, *America the Middlebrow: Women's Novels, Progressivism, and Middlebrow Authorship Between the Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 20.
 50. Woolf, 'Middlebrow', 182.
 51. Alison Light even refers to Agatha Christie as a 'popular modernist' (*Forever England*, 64).
 52. Aoife Leahy describes this relationship as literal rather than metaphorical, in the case of Sayers, whom she argues desired to educate her readers in the social issues of her time through references to familiar Victorian literature. See *The Victorian Approach to Modernism in the Fiction of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 25.
 53. Melissa Schaub, 'Middlebrow Feminism and the Politics of Sentiment: From *The Moonstone* to Dorothy L. Sayers', *Modern Language Studies* (forthcoming).
 54. Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express* (New York: Pocket Books, 1940), 131.
 55. Ngaio Marsh, *Vintage Murder* (New York: Jove, 1972), 140, 141.
 56. Ngaio Marsh, *Artists in Crime* (New York: Berkley Prime Crime, 1994), 221.
 57. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (New York: Avon, 1963), 186.
 58. Sayers, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, 188.
 59. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Murder Must Advertise* (New York: Avon, 1967), 281.
 60. Margery Allingham, *Flowers for the Judge* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), 162, 163.
 61. See Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, for an extensive discussion of the isolation and emotional difficulties of working-class 'scholarship children' educated out of their class, particularly pp. 142–5. Rigget exactly fits the pattern Rose describes.
 62. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*, 209.
 63. Allingham, *Flowers for the Judge*, 162.
 64. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Whose Body?* (New York: Avon, 1961), 156.
 65. Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 209.
 66. For examples of a pessimistic reading of *Gaudy Night* in terms of women's ability to transcend their gender, see, for example, Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 206–9; and Ann McClellan, 'Alma Mater: Women, the Academy, and Mothering in Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night*', *Literature Interpretation Theory* 15 (2004): 321–46. For an optimistic, though non-scholarly reading of the novel, see Harriet Williams, 'Gaudy Night', *Middlebrow Magazine*, last modified 21 January 2011, accessed 8 March 2012, <http://www.middlebrowmagazine.co.uk/home/?p=1216>. This last review represents the extent to which the word 'middlebrow' has been recuperated in today's popular culture; *Middlebrow* is a Web magazine celebrating and redefining middlebrow culture for a postmodern age.
 67. P. D. James, *Talking About Detective Fiction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 82.

68. Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 9.
69. In addition to Horsley, see Knight, *Crime Fiction 1800–2000*; Charles J. Rzepka, *Detective Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005); and John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
70. Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 46.
71. See Knight, *Crime Fiction 1800–2000*, 92; Rzepka, *Detective Fiction*, 193; and Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 45–6.
72. Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 18.
73. Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 20.
74. See Jessica Mann, *Deadlier Than the Male: Why Are Respectable English Women So Good at Murder?* (New York: Macmillan, 1981); and Kathleen Gregory Klein, *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).
75. Mann, *Deadlier Than the Male*, 105.
76. For a concurring view of the subversive potential of fantasized female detectives, see Carla T. Kungl, *Creating the Fictional Female Detective: The Sleuth Heroines of British Women Writers, 1890–1940* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006).
77. Carolyn Heilbrun, 'Keynote Address: Gender and Detective Fiction', in *The Sleuth and the Scholar: Origins, Evolution, and Current Trends in Detective Fiction*, ed. Barbara A. Rader and Howard G. Zettler (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 7.
78. For a view of the relationship as an "'insider" compact' uniting the reader and author, see Richard Martin, *Ink in Her Blood: The Life and Crime Fiction of Margery Allingham* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), 10.
79. Charles Rzepka suggests, more intriguingly, that in fact the adversary is the detective, and that the author's role is more like that of the master of the hunt – both reader and detective are hunting the same prey, and the author uses the 'fair play' rules to ensure that both have the same chance of success (*Detective Fiction*, 14).
80. See, for example, Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 38.
81. Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, 19.
82. Dorothy L. Sayers, 'Are Women Human?', in *Unpopular Opinions: Twenty-one Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1947), 139–40, emphasis in the original.
83. Sayers, 'Are Women Human?', 130.
84. Crystal Downing, *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 47.
85. Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, 17, 21.
86. Light, *Forever England*, 9.

2 Victorian Contexts: Failed Gentlemen and New Women

1. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 3rd edn (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 10.

2. Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 12, 10.
3. Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 29–30.
4. Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (University of Chicago Press, 1988), 8.
5. Poovey, *Uneven Developments*, 11.
6. Virginia Woolf, 'Professions for Women', in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942), 237.
7. Ann Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990). Ardis proposes that many modernist novels written before 1920, including Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*, are 'about New Women' (169).
8. Knight, *Crime Fiction 1800–2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 36.
9. Knight, *Crime Fiction 1800–2000*, 34.
10. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1989), 69.
11. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 337.
12. Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, 11.
13. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Boston: Bedford St. Martin's, 1996), 398.
14. Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman*, 369–70.
15. Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (Oxford: World's Classics, 1981), 200, 210.
16. Brontë, *Shirley*, 320–1.
17. Brontë, *Shirley*, 485–90.
18. Brontë, *Shirley*, 623.
19. Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1999), 109.
20. Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (Oxford: World's Classics, 1989), 123, 185.
21. Collins, *The Moonstone*, 109.
22. Collins, *The Moonstone*, 407.
23. Collins, *The Moonstone*, 268.
24. Collins, *The Moonstone*, 296.
25. Collins, *The Moonstone*, 421.
26. Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990); Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the fin de siècle* (Manchester University Press, 1997), 2.
27. Quoted in Ardis, *New Women, New Novels*, 51.
28. Gail Cunningham, *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 50; Elaine Showalter, *Inventing Herself: Claiming a Feminist Intellectual Heritage* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 69.
29. Ledger, *The New Woman*, 23.
30. For second-wave connections, see Cunningham, *The New Woman*, 156; and Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies: Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird* (Manchester University Press, 2004), 2. For the third-wave connection, see Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*.

31. Catherine Kenney, *The Remarkable Case of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Kent State University Press, 1990), 123.
32. Rita Kranidis describes the decade as a time when earlier legislative failures had caused feminists 'to lose faith in the political process and to rely instead on social agitation and a more aggressive public visibility'. See *Subversive Discourse: The Cultural Production of Late Victorian Feminist Novels* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 15.
33. Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, 9.
34. The cartoon is frequently reprinted; for one example, see Vivien Gardner, introduction to *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850–1914*, ed. Vivien Gardner and Susan Rutherford (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 4.
35. Quoted in Ardis, *New Women, New Novels*, 25.
36. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*, 269.
37. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*, 75.
38. Georgette Heyer, *The Unfinished Clue* (New York: Bantam, 1979), 7.
39. Ledger, *The New Woman*, 151.
40. Ledger, *The New Woman*, 162–9.
41. Patricia Murphy, *Time is of the Essence: Temporality, Gender, and the New Woman* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 170.
42. Sayers, *Murder Must Advertise*, 31, 32.
43. Ngaio Marsh, *Death of a Peer* (New York: Jove, 1980), 268.
44. Gardner, 'Introduction', 6.
45. Ledger, *The New Woman*, 17.
46. Gardner, 'Introduction', 12.
47. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Strong Poison* (New York: Avon, 1967), 94.
48. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, 158.
49. See Ledger, *The New Woman*, 20.
50. Gail Cunningham measures the success of New Woman novels by the positions adopted by novels of the 1900s and 1910s, immediately following the short-lived New Woman phase. These novels were 'sexually aware but domestically inclined', treating sex only as an adjunct of marriage to avoid distracting from the now more-prominent suffragist cause. See *The New Woman*, 155–6.
51. Hugh E. M. Stutfield, 'The Psychology of Feminism', in *A New Woman Reader*, ed. Carolyn Christensen Nelson (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2001), 243–53.
52. Quoted in Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies*, 18.
53. Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies*, 168.
54. Mona Caird, *The Daughters of Danaus* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1989), 341.
55. Cunningham, *The New Woman*, 72.
56. George Egerton, 'A Cross Line', in *A New Woman Reader*, ed. Carolyn Christensen Nelson (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2001), 14.
57. Egerton, 'A Cross Line', 16.
58. Egerton, 'A Cross Line', 18.

59. Egerton, 'A Cross Line', 21.
60. Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), 171, 173.
61. Kranidis, *Subversive Discourse*, 104.
62. Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, 156.
63. Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies*, 160.
64. Ledger, *The New Woman*, 186.
65. Egerton, 'A Cross Line', 14.
66. Ardis, *New Women, New Novels*, 156.
67. George Gissing, *The Odd Women* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 299.
68. Gissing, *The Odd Women*, 308.
69. Gissing, *The Odd Women*, 315.
70. Gissing, *The Odd Women*, 318–20.
71. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, 9.
72. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, 36–7.
73. Gissing, *The Odd Women*, 307.
74. Ledger, *The New Woman*, 179.
75. Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, 31.
76. Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, 31; Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, 47.
77. Quoted in Ardis, *New Women, New Novels*, 48.
78. Quoted in Ardis, *New Women, New Novels*, 54, 56.
79. See, for example, Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, 206.
80. See, for example, Murphy, *Time is of the Essence*, 231.

3 Anatomy of the Female Gentleman

1. Sayers, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, 55.
2. Sayers, *Murder Must Advertise*, 13; Agatha Christie, *The Murder on the Links* (New York: Berkley, 1984), 2.
3. Georgette Heyer, *Death in the Stocks* (Thirsk: House of Stratus, 2001), 17.
4. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 35.
5. Heyer, *The Unfinished Clue*, 7.
6. Heyer, *Death in the Stocks*, 51.
7. Margery Allingham, *Police at the Funeral* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), 87.
8. Rzepka, *Detective Fiction*, 169.
9. Quoted in Waters, *The Perfect Gentleman*, 21.
10. Geoffrey Beard, *The Compleat Gentleman: Five Centuries of Aristocratic Life* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 34.
11. Waters, *The Perfect Gentleman*, 21.
12. Waters, *The Perfect Gentleman*, 38.
13. Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 197–8.
14. Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 211.
15. Janice A. Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) is the most famous explication of this broad and recurring romance novel

- theme, but anyone with a cursory familiarity with *Jane Eyre* will recognize it. See my discussion in Chapter 2 of George Egerton's 'A Cross Line' for a New Woman precursor of the comradely Female Gentleman.
16. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*, 4.
 17. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*, 98.
 18. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*, 293.
 19. Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, 76–7, emphasis in the original.
 20. Margery Allingham, *More Work for the Undertaker* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), 114.
 21. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*, 376.
 22. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*, 383.
 23. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Clouds of Witness* (New York: Avon, 1966), 49.
 24. Sayers, *Clouds of Witness*, 128, emphasis in the original.
 25. Sayers, *Murder Must Advertise*, 66.
 26. Jeni Curtis asserts that Alleyn is 'the first career policeman' in Golden Age detective fiction. Curtis emphasizes the role of the outsider in Marsh's novels, tracing it to Marsh's own New Zealand origin, and says that Alleyn 'is able to detach himself from that very society which created him' because of his ambiguous class status, just as Roberta Grey can be 'critical' of the Lampreys because of her colonial origin. See 'Queens of Crime: Ngaio Marsh and Women's Detective Fiction', in *Return to Black Beech: Papers from a Centenary Symposium on Ngaio Marsh, 1895–1995*, ed. Carole Acheson and Carolyn Lidgard (Christchurch, NZ: The Centre for Continuing Education, 1996), 53–4.
 27. Georgette Heyer, *They Found Him Dead* (New York: Berkley, 1987), 14.
 28. Georgette Heyer, *Duplicate Death* (New York: Bantam, 1970), 169.
 29. Heyer, *Duplicate Death*, 168.
 30. Helen Hughes notes that swashbuckling 'cloak-and-dagger yarns' designed to appeal to both sexes were the original form of the romance genre, but that in the early 1930s the historical romance transformed into 'predominantly a women's genre'; Hughes implies, but does not quite openly argue, that Heyer's own popularity and host of imitators were responsible for the change. See *The Historical Romance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 3, 10.
 31. Sir Henry Newbolt, 'Vitaï Lampada', in *Collected Poems 1897–1907* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1910), lines 11 and 16. The poem may be viewed through Project Gutenberg at <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/13900/pg13900.html>
 32. Donna T. Andrew, 'The Code of Honour and Its Critics: The Opposition to Duelling in England, 1700–1850', *Social History* 5 (1980): 415.
 33. Young, *Culture, Class, and Gender*, 22. In her comprehensive history of anti-dueling movements, Donna T. Andrew also links the anti-dueling impulse directly to the rise of the middle class, and argues that anti-dueling movements could only be successful after middle-class values had become culturally hegemonic, so that dueling only began to wane in the late eighteenth century, after 'the replacement of the code of honour

- by what might be called the code of Christian commerce'. See Andrew, 'The Code of Honour and Its Critics', 434.
34. Young, *Culture, Class, and Gender*, 24.
 35. See the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of 'honour, n.' definitions 3a and 3b.
 36. Georgette Heyer, *Devil's Cub* (New York: Signet, 1992), 89.
 37. Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 206.
 38. Georgette Heyer, *The Grand Sophy* (New York: HarperPaperbacks, 1992), 327.
 39. Heyer, *Devil's Cub*, 202–3.
 40. Heyer, *The Grand Sophy*, 303.
 41. Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, 48.
 42. Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, 52.
 43. Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, 95.
 44. Agatha Christie, *The Secret Adversary* (New York: Bantam, 1967), 6.
 45. Christie, *The Secret Adversary*, 8–9.
 46. Agatha Christie, *Partners in Crime* (New York: Signet, 2000), 214.
 47. Christie, *The Secret Adversary*, 7, 56.
 48. Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 74–5.
 49. Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality, and the Body* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001), 37, 43.
 50. Merja Makinen gives an admirable summary of the positive and negative views – often extravagantly worded on both sides. *Agatha Christie*, 28.
 51. Christie, *The Secret Adversary*, 30, emphasis in the original.
 52. Agatha Christie, *N or M?* (New York: Signet, 2000), 47.
 53. Christie, *N or M?*, 46.
 54. Agatha Christie, *The Secret of Chimneys* (New York: Berkley, 1984), 68.
 55. Christie, *The Secret of Chimneys*, 212.
 56. Agatha Christie, *The Seven Dials Mystery* (New York: Bantam, 1971), 32.
 57. Christie, *The Seven Dials Mystery*, 7.
 58. Ngaio Marsh, *A Man Lay Dead* (New York: Jove, 1978), 16.
 59. Ngaio Marsh, *The Nursing Home Murder* (New York: Jove, 1963), 150.
 60. Christie, *The Seven Dials Mystery*, 58.
 61. Christie, *The Seven Dials Mystery*, 58.
 62. Christie, *Murder on the Links*, 217.
 63. Christie, *Murder on the Links*, 2.
 64. The text implies that the kiss seals an engagement (he reminds her that Cinderella, as he has called her throughout the novel, marries the Prince), but Dulcie is never mentioned again in the series, so Christie must have changed her mind about attaching Hastings to anyone permanently.
 65. Christie, *Murder on the Links*, 5–6.
 66. Light, *Forever England*, 67.
 67. Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 37.
 68. Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 36.
 69. Margery Allingham, *The Fear Sign* (New York: Avon Books, 1989), 50.

70. Allingham, *The Fear Sign*, 57.
71. Allingham, *The Fear Sign*, 231.
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75. Georgette Heyer, *Frederica* (New York: Bantam, 1973), 223.
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77. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, 32.
78. Agatha Christie, *13 at Dinner* (New York: Dell, 1965), 83.
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86. Castronovo, *The English Gentleman*, 25.
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123. Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 40.
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135. Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, 297, 301.
136. Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, 309.
137. Allingham, *The Fashion in Shrouds*, 308.
138. Gill Plain, "'A Good Cry or a Nice Rape': Margery Allingham's Gender Agenda', *Critical Survey* 15, no. 2 (2003): 65.
139. In analyzing the book reviews Allingham wrote between 1938 and 1944, Julia Jones finds a similar pattern of change in Allingham's class politics – a renunciation in the 1940s of the snobbery of the 1930s. See "'A fine, sturdy piece of work [...]': Margery Allingham's Book Reviews for *Time & Tide* 1938–1944', *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 23, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 9–18.
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142. For a concurring view of Allingham's elevation of 'bread-and-butter' love as an ideal over the emotional extremes of feminine women and cake love, see Geraldine Perriam, 'Sex, *Sweet Danger*, and the Fairy Tale', *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 23, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 41–8.
143. Marsh, *Artists in Crime*, 12.

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145. Ngaio Marsh, *Death in a White Tie* (New York: Jove, 1980).
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148. Suzette Henke, 'Modernism, Trauma, and Narrative Reformulation', in *Gender in Modernism*, ed. Bonnie Kime Scott (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 555.
149. Sayers, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, 10.
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151. Sayers, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, 55.
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153. Georgette Heyer, *Why Shoot a Butler?* (New York: Bantam, 1970), 6.
154. Georgette Heyer, *Behold, Here's Poison* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1979), 39.
155. Heyer, *Behold, Here's Poison*, 159.
156. Stella Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm* (St Albans: Panther Books, 1973), 48.
157. Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm*, 19, emphasis in the original.
158. Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm*, 48.
159. Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm*, 19.
160. Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 180.
161. Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm*, 13, emphasis in the original.
162. Christie, *The Secret Adversary*, 157.
163. Christie, *The Secret Adversary*, 215.
164. Agatha Christie, *Sad Cypress* (New York: Berkley, 1984), 13.
165. Christie, *Sad Cypress*, 221.
166. Christie, *Sad Cypress*, 219–20.
167. Martin, *Ink in Her Blood*, 10.
168. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, 57–8.
169. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, 39.
170. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, 96.
171. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, 97.
172. Light, *Forever England*, 77–8.
173. For example, the entire run of Harlequin reissues of Heyer from the 1990s has 'the next best thing to reading Jane Austen' on the back cover, attributed to *Publishers Weekly*.
174. Heyer, *Frederica*, 228, emphasis in the original.
175. Jane Aiken Hodge, *The Private World of Georgette Heyer* (London: The Bodley Head, 1984), 59.
176. Georgette Heyer, *The Talisman Ring* (New York: Harlequin, 2000), 27, emphasis in the original.
177. Heyer, *The Talisman Ring*, 150–1.
178. Heyer, *The Talisman Ring*, 151–2.
179. Heyer, *The Talisman Ring*, 152.
180. Karin E. Westman presents a similar portrait of Sarah Thane as the ur-heroine in her analysis of Heyer's novels, focused more on the

- character's power of weaving stories. See 'A Story of Her Weaving: The Self-Authoring Heroines of Georgette Heyer's Regency Romance', in *Doubled Plots: Romance and History*, ed. Susan Strehle and Mary Paniccia Carden (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 165–84.
181. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press, 1975), 29.
 182. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, 53.
 183. DeKoven, *Rich and Strange*, 8.
 184. Simon Joyce, *Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 11.
 185. Joyce, *Victorians in the Rearview Mirror*, 69.
 186. Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, 25, 26.
 187. Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 291.
 188. Heyer, *Devil's Cub*, 183–4.
 189. Heyer, *Devil's Cub*, 184.
 190. I have no doubt many readers of this very book have just vowed never to read Heyer on the strength of the rape motif in this novel. An opposing view comes from Sallie McNamara, who quotes extensively from the initial scene in which Vidal threatens to rape Mary to illustrate the erotic quality of Heyer's novels, going so far as to compare that scene to Erica Jong's famous 'zipless fuck', sex 'free from the restraint of social codes'. She is certainly not wrong that the scene in question is eroticized, and that Vidal represents a sexual fantasy in many ways. Since she sees the emotional restraint characteristic of the interwar period as a feature of conservative gender ideology rather than as a force for feminism, it is not surprising that she also assigns a positive value to any narrative that allows women 'the space for personal fantasy', which she regards as the primary value of Heyer's historical settings. 'Georgette Heyer: The Historical Romance and the Consumption of the Erotic, 1918–1939', in *All the World and Her Husband: Women in Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture*, ed. Maggie Andrews and Mary M. Talbot (London: Cassell, 2000), 93, 94.

4 Conclusion: Assessing the Female Gentleman

1. See, for example, Curtis, 'Queens of Crime', 48–56; Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, especially Chapter 2; and numerous discussions of the way that Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* violates the conventions of narrative form.
2. Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 176.
3. Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 149–51.
4. See Radway, *A Feeling for Books*.
5. See Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 11.

6. For an important exception to this rule, privileging the subversive middle over the containment of the ending, see Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 6.
7. Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, 16.
8. Georgette Heyer's romances are particularly well-adapted for this kind of commentary because of their historical settings. Helen Hughes argues that historical settings allow features of the reader's own society to be 'presented for criticism if they are shown, appropriately modified (in embryo, perhaps), embedded in a historical context', which has the effect of defamiliarizing them and opening them for scrutiny. The contrast between Sophy Stanton-Lacy and Eugenia Wraxton in *The Grand Sophy* that I described in Chapter 3 is an example of this effect: Eugenia's Evangelical morality is presented in the novel as the antithesis of gentlemanliness and as a chilling preview of Victorian values 'in embryo'. See Hughes, *The Historical Romance*, 5.
9. Gillian Gill, *Agatha Christie: The Woman and Her Mysteries* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), xi. See also Light, *Forever England*, Chapter 2; and Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*.
10. Makinen, *Agatha Christie*, 16.
11. Terrance L. Lewis, *Dorothy L. Sayers' Wimsey and Interwar British Society* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1994), 50.
12. Latham, 'Am I a Snob?'
13. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, 126.
14. Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 49.
15. Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, 39, emphasis in the original.
16. For a summary of this strand of feminist criticism, see Elizabeth Trembley, "'Collaring the Other Fellow's Property": Feminism Reads Dorothy L. Sayers', in *Women Times Three: Writers, Detectives, Readers*, ed. Kathleen Gregory Klein (Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press, 1995), 81–2. For another example of a feminist critic frustrated by Harriet's marriage to Peter, see B. J. Rahn, 'The Marriage of True Minds', in *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Centenary Celebration*, ed. Alzina Stone Dale (New York: Walker, 1993), 51–65.
17. Trembley, "'Collaring the Other Fellow's Property'", 87.
18. Kenney, *The Remarkable Case of Dorothy L. Sayers*, 123 and 123 n. 2.
19. Sayers, 'Are Women Human?', 141.
20. Downing, *Writing Performances*, 47.
21. The variety of Sayers' female characters is perhaps a result of her interest in traditional New Women, not just those of her own generation. Laurel Young argues that the Harriet Vane novels, especially the final two, are New Woman novels rather than detective novels (which might explain many critics' dissatisfaction with their plotting and other detective novel features). They incorporate many characters of the previous generation of Victorian New Women, with whom the younger, 'androgynous', generation was often in conflict, and try to reconcile them; Miss Climpson's

- role in *Strong Poison* is one extended example. See 'Dorothy L. Sayers and the New Woman Detective Novel', *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 23, no. 4 (2005): 45.
22. Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*, 206.
 23. Robert Kuhn McGregor, with Ethan Lewis, *Conundrums for the Long Week-End: England, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Lord Peter Wimsey* (Kent State University Press, 2000), 166.
 24. Trembley, "'Collaring the Other Fellow's Property'", 83.
 25. Christie, *N or M?*, 200, emphasis in the original.
 26. Downing, *Writing Performances*, 5, 41, 55–6.
 27. Trembley, "'Collaring the Other Fellow's Property'", 97.
 28. Dorothy L. Sayers, 'The Human-Not-Quite-Human', in *Unpopular Opinions: Twenty-one Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1947), 146.
 29. Bruce Harding, "'The Great and True Amphibian": The New Zealand–England Polarity in the Fiction of Ngaio Marsh', in *Return to Black Beech: Papers from a Centenary Symposium on Ngaio Marsh, 1895–1995*, ed. Carole Acheson and Carolyn Lidgard (Christchurch, NZ: The Centre for Continuing Education, 1996), 60.
 30. Howard McNaughton, 'Alibi Writing: Myths of Ngaio', in Acheson and Lidgard, eds, *Return to Black Beech*, 98.
 31. Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, 57.
 32. Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, New Accents (London: Routledge, 1980), 67.
 33. Belsey, *Critical Practice*, Chapter 3.2 (pp. 67–84).
 34. Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 238.
 35. Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 47.
 36. Ledger, *The New Woman*, 39.
 37. Ledger, *The New Woman*, 38.
 38. Ledger, *The New Woman*, 63.
 39. Rzepka, *Detective Fiction*, 165–8.
 40. Agatha Christie, *Cards on the Table* (New York: Dell, 1962), 123.
 41. Marsh, *Vintage Murder*, 140.
 42. Allingham, *Police at the Funeral*, 244.
 43. Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, 173.
 44. Kungl, *Creating the Fictional Female Detective*, 171.
 45. Christie, *The Secret of Chimneys*, 237–8.

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