

# *'A Little Strain with Servants': Gender, Modernity and Domesticity in Daphne Du Maurier's Rebecca and Celia Fremlin's The Seven Chars of Chelsea*

Judy Giles

There is a scene in the novel *Rebecca*, made much of in the Hitchcock film of 1940, in which the narrator visits the forbidden west wing of Manderley which has remained undisturbed since Rebecca's death. The sinister housekeeper, Mrs Danvers, in a voice 'ingratiating and sweet as honey, horrible, false . . . low and intimate' guides her round Rebecca's bedroom and seductively displays Rebecca's lavish clothes and possessions.<sup>1</sup> The bed with its golden cover, the wardrobe of clothes, the scent bottles, the hairbrushes, the slippers, the monogrammed nightdress case and, of course, the flimsy, see-through nightdress all function as markers of Rebecca's sexuality and femininity, but they also work as signifiers of a particular wealth and social position. Manderley is a place of conspicuous consumption with its valuable furnishings, paintings and ornaments, large household of servants and, in particular, this erotically charged bedroom, 'the most beautiful room in the house' (*Rebecca*, p. 174). And it is the socially inferior housekeeper with her 'skull's face' who performs the role of Mephistopheles, tempting both narrator and reader to consume the erotic and aesthetic symbolisations she offers. This scene which has been read very convincingly for its lesbian sub-text,<sup>2</sup> combines the erotic coding of Mrs Danvers' infatuation with the dead Rebecca with codes of consumption that suggest the ways in which sexuality, consumption and mistress/servant relationships become inextricably linked.

In this paper I attempt to unravel these diverse strands and in particular the historical specificity of the representational codes that constitute them. I have chosen as case studies *Rebecca* by Daphne Du Maurier and *The Seven Chars of Chelsea* by Celia Fremlin.<sup>3</sup> One of the things that quickly strikes the

reader of texts written in the 1930s is the consistent reference to the modern. This sense of responding to and writing for a 'modern age' was not confined to a narrowly defined aesthetic modernism. A few examples will suffice: Vera Brittain published *Women's Work in Modern England* (1928), Edward Griffiths discussed birth control in *Modern Marriage and Birth Control* (1935), and the Northcliffe Press published a health and beauty manual entitled *Modern Woman* (c.1930).<sup>4</sup> However, in most cultural histories of the early twentieth century the modern is almost always identified with masculinity and the public sphere. As Rita Felski has argued, the paradigmatic experiences of modernity have, for the most part, been based on writings (philosophical, literary, political) by men and on representations of masculinity.<sup>5</sup> In standard accounts of modernity key figures, like *the flâneur* and the dandy, are male and the key spaces of modernity, such as the nation-state, the workplace, the corporation, the city street are also masculine.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the feminine has frequently been represented as a refuge from modernity, a symbolic space of redemption, nature and authenticity in which the injuries of modern living can be healed. In this account, the apparently timeless feminine values of intimacy and authenticity are set against the masculine experiences of alienation and dehumanization that characterise modern history. This positioning of woman, home and private sphere as beyond the logic of modernity not only denies women a place in the historical record but also represents the private/feminine as outside and untouched by the complex meshing of modern phenomena. Hence the starting point for this paper is Felski's question '[h]ow would our understanding of modernity change if instead of taking male experience as paradigmatic, we were to look instead at texts written primarily by or about women?'<sup>7</sup> Both of the texts selected suggest ways in which the imaginary landscapes of private and domestic life offer different versions of the tensions of modernity than those produced by male-authored narratives and at the same time inscribe the home and the private in the historical record.

Women's lives were transformed by industrialisation, urbanisation, different family forms, new ways of regulating time and space and the development of mass entertainment. Moreover, gendered experiences of modernity and domesticity were further complicated by class, race and sexuality as well as the intertwined identities of consumer, mother, servant, mistress, worker, daughter.<sup>8</sup> Felski argues that it is 'these distinctively feminine encounters with the various facets of the modern that have been largely ignored by cultural and social meta-theories oblivious to the gendering of historical processes' and that women's 'active and varied negotiations with different aspects of their social environment' have as a result been written out of history.<sup>9</sup>

An important social 'negotiation' in the 1930s was with the system of domestic service. Labour-saving devices and smaller homes offered women opportunities to be free of a system of domestic labour that was increasingly seen as demeaning to both parties. The question of how to run a modern

home without servants was taken up by women's magazines as well as household manuals and 'the servant problem' was continuously discussed by women's groups and committees.<sup>10</sup> Questions of domestic organisation plagued middle-class women in the years between the wars. The 'servant problem' was never simply about recruiting more working-class women to an occupation they were increasingly able to reject. It was as often about the kinds of relationship that were possible and desirable between maid and mistress. The ways in which servant/mistress relationships are represented offer insights into middle-class women's responses to the tensions of modern life at a specific historical moment.

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Although there has been considerable critical scrutiny of the novel, *Rebecca*, and Hitchcock's film in recent years, none of this has really touched on the significance of the relationships between Mrs Danvers, Rebecca and the narrator that are central to both the plot and the emotional landscape of the novel.<sup>11</sup> There are some significant aspects of Du Maurier's own experience and subjectivity that illuminate this emotional landscape. Throughout her life Du Maurier wrestled with what she called 'the boy in the box', believing herself to be some kind of 'half-breed', and desperately anxious to dissociate herself from what she labelled 'Venetian tendencies'.<sup>12</sup> Du Maurier loved other women passionately but this was never to be confused with lesbianism for 'by God and by Christ if anyone should call that sort of love by that unattractive word that begins with "L", I'd tear their guts out'.<sup>13</sup> During puberty the only person who was aware of these struggles with her sexual identity was her governess, Maud Waddell or 'Tod' as she was nicknamed. Tod was a well-educated, independent-minded woman who had travelled extensively before joining the Du Maurier household. Very quickly she became an adored confidant to the young Daphne and throughout their lives they remained in close contact. Tod was twenty years older than her pupil and a strong character. As a result she was able to offer the adolescent Daphne a certain 'masculine' authority that she craved. Equally when Du Maurier met her future husband, 'Boy' Browning, in the autumn of 1931 it was his confident authority as well as his good looks that she found attractive. Throughout her life she admired authority and self-control and those, including herself, who failed to live up to her exacting standards in this respect were designated 'pathetic'.<sup>14</sup> She was never comfortable with the idea that she should supervise servants and always felt intimidated by those she employed to help her. Her respect for confidence and authority and her own feelings of inferiority, timidity and sexual confusion produced the psychosexual landscape of the novel.

The narrative of *Rebecca* unfolds entirely through the memories, dreams and fantasies of the unnamed young woman who becomes the second wife

of the wealthy Maxim de Winter. The novel focuses on the inner struggles of the narrator whose timidity and naïvety constantly allow others to dominate and exploit her. She desperately desires the kind of self-confidence and poise that she envies in Rebecca and these desires are, to a large extent, dependent on gaining her husband's love and approval. However, the self-confidence to which she aspires is not simply a manifestation of an inner security but is closely linked to the acquisition of a social identity. Mixed with dreams of sexual and romantic pleasures are fantasies of what it will be like to be Mrs de Winter. The self-image she constructs involves seeing herself as successful hostess, compassionate visitor of the poor, and domestic organiser. Her reward will be Maxim's sister saying "It's really wonderful how happy you have made him; everyone is so pleased, you are such a success." (*Rebecca*, p. 59) The dreams and aspirations of the young woman are as firmly located in a particular class situation as much as in the romantic: she yearns for love but she also longs to escape the drudgery, tedium and demeaning existence she inhabits as paid companion to the vulgar, cruel, Mrs Van Hopper. As mistress of Manderley she will acquire the social status she lacks.

Once married the narrator is haunted by reminders of Maxim's first wife, Rebecca, and these are fuelled by the hostility she experiences from the housekeeper, Mrs Danvers. Rebecca, the beautiful, accomplished, first wife, is not simply perceived in the narrator's jealous imagination as sexually confident and socially adept but as adroit and capable in her management of the Manderley servants. Indeed it is this ability (or inability) to manage servants that the narrator uses as a means of representing the public manifestations of her timidity, her social anxieties and even her sexuality. For example, the moment of the narrator's transition from *gauche* outsider to confident wife is marked by her first truly adult sexual encounter with her husband. This occurs immediately after he has confessed to the murder of Rebecca and is represented in terms of the conventional erotics of the popular romance formula,

[a]t the moment I am nothing, I have no heart, and no mind, and no senses, I am just a wooden thing in Maxim's arms. Then he began to kiss me. He had not kissed me like this before. I put my hands behind his head and shut my eyes. . . . He went on kissing me, hungry, desperate, murmuring my name (*Rebecca*, p. 279).

One of the immediate effects of this marital reconciliation is the narrator's almost magical ability to deal with the domestic staff and, in particular, the hitherto terrifying Mrs Danvers. She reprimands one of the maids and observes, 'I had not thought it would be so easy to be severe. I wondered why it had seemed hard for me before.' (*Rebecca*, p. 302) The fulfilment of sexual and romantic desire confers a confident maturity that finds its public display in the ability to manage the domestic organisation of Manderley. And it

is noteworthy that this textual patterning parallels contemporary legal discourses that defined the husband as master of the household servants and the wife as his agent. A household manual of the period published by the Woman's Book Club advising (middle-class) women on all aspects of home-making, offers guidance on the legal relationship between husband, wife and servant. Jack and Preston, the authors of the manual, state,

As all dealings with servants are mainly conducted by the wife, as superintendent of the domestic side of the home, the mistress is more often than not regarded as having supreme control over them. She it is who engages them, allots their various duties, provides for their outings and holidays, and dismisses them when their work is unsatisfactory. This is a typical instance of the wife acting as her husband's agent, for where husband and wife live together it is the husband who is the legal head of the servants of a household.<sup>15</sup>

Hence, the text articulates a specifically historical form of middle-class consciousness in which the roles of wife and mistress of servants are inextricably linked: to be a 'good' wife may mean sexual submission privately but will also carry a certain authority in the public arena of domestic management. The middle class wife becomes the conduit through which middle-class masculinity wields authority in the home in much the same way that the structures of imperialism allowed for the appointment of indigenous agents to act on behalf of white imperialists in the colonies.

However, the Manderley household is not a straightforward fictional reflection of the how the landed gentry lived in England between the wars. The Du Maurier family, although having a long history that Gerald (Daphne's father) loved to discuss, had its roots in the metropolitan world of the theatre and the arts rather than the countryside. Equally, Daphne Du Maurier's mother came from a family of urban professionals: her maternal grandfather founded a firm of chartered surveyors in Cambridge and her father was a solicitor who came from an East Anglian family of lawyers.<sup>16</sup> And Menabilly, on which Manderley is based, was not a long established family home but first seen on a summer visit to the Du Maurier holiday home at Fowey in Cornwall.<sup>17</sup> The name Maxim de Winter hints at a non-English ancestry and the descriptions of the house frequently resemble stage sets in which a variety of signifying objects are mixed indiscriminately. The icons of a certain Englishness, tea under the chestnut tree, the dog, the mackintoshes, are combined with images of sexuality and decadence, the figure of the cupid, the statue of the satyr, and, above all, Rebecca's bedroom. Du Maurier's Manderley is an imaginary space that owes more to the theatre and her love of Menabilly, than to realistically accurate depictions of country house living. Manderley is a dream scape ('Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again') in which are juxtaposed the traditional (English, masculine) structures of authority, self

restraint and deference, beloved by Du Maurier, alongside the pleasures of performance and theatrical excess that equally formed her imagination (*Rebecca*, p. 5). For example Rebecca's bedroom is an erotically charged, playful and excessively commodified stage set that itself performs the imagined persona of the absent Rebecca, 'the room had more the appearance of a setting on the stage' the scene set between performances. The curtain having fallen for the night, the evening over, and the first act set for tomorrow's matinée' (*Rebecca*, pp. 173–4). And as I have stated, Mrs Danvers acts as a Mephistophelian actor-director who brings the stage to light; who offers the narrator a glimpse of what might be socially and sexually; and who finally, in destroying Manderley, condemns the narrator to a future in which these promises can be grasped only in dream, memory and longing. Moreover, Mrs Danvers is the first character (other than Maxim) introduced by the narrator to the reader.

However, despite the melancholy and sense of loss that pervades *Rebecca*, the novel offered certain pleasures to its contemporary women readers. Twenty-first century readers for whom domestic service is a relic of an earlier age cannot register the presence of Mrs Danvers or the narrator's difficulties with the servants in the same way that these might have struck middle-class women in the 1930s. To be 'ruled' by one's servants smacked of 'lower-class' status and an inability to elicit the deference due to a certain social standing. To this end, mistresses were expected to wield a firm but kindly authority over their servants. The same household manual cited above warned its readers:

A servant is quick to grasp the fact when her mistress is not versed in the arts of domestic science, and quicker still to take advantage of the ignorance thus displayed. She knows that there is no trained eye to detect flaws in her work; that a room half dusted will seldom evoke a protest; that a table carelessly or slovenly laid will as often as not pass unheeded. The mistress will be made to suffer in many little ways for her ignorance in respect to household duties until by bitter experience she will awaken to the realisation of the fact that knowledge is indeed power, and strive to learn what she should have known when she first began to reign as mistress of her own home.<sup>18</sup>

'To reign as mistress of her own home' was a mark of maturity but also a position of, albeit limited, power for middle-class women who were still precluded from many public offices. The nightmarish, terrifying figure of Mrs Danvers must have tapped into everything that middle-class women readers most feared about their relations with servants. Deeply-felt anxieties about servants who on the surface appeared deferential and respectful but were covertly hostile, contemptuous, manipulative and malicious could find expression in the imaginary landscape of Du Maurier's novel. Mrs Danvers, one of the 'villains' of the novel, is described in the melodramatic terms

of Gothic horror, 'someone tall and gaunt, dressed in deep black, whose prominent cheek-bones and great hollow eyes gave her a skull's face, parchment-white, set on a skeleton's frame' (*Rebecca*, p. 72). Moreover, when the narrator first meets the servants of Manderley she comments that 'they were the watching crowd about the block, and I the victim with my hands behind my back' (*Rebecca*, p. 72). Thus, the encounter between servant and mistress begins to take on the status of historical and political struggle between ruler and 'the mob' and is not simply rendered, as mistress servant relationships so often were, as trivial, domestic matters outside history and beyond politics. Even if this inscription is only temporarily achieved via the act of reading, it may, nevertheless, have offered Du Maurier's middle-class women readers the possibility of seeing one of their deepest anxieties inscribed seriously and historically.

Tried and acquitted for murder, Maxim and his second wife are exiled to a life of rootless wandering around the hotels of Europe. The narrator has acquired the confident selfhood to which she aspired but does not possess a place in which this painfully achieved authority can be exercised. Moreover, there are no heirs to the de Winter line. The de Winters deprived of the markers of middle class status, homeland, descendants and possessions are condemned to a state of perpetual rootlessness in which the future is uncertain and the past traumatic. The only solace for the narrator is a deeply internalised self-containment in which pain and trauma remain hidden and Manderley can only be visited in dreams. Nevertheless, there are gains. Freed from the obligations of motherhood and middle-class wifeness, the narrator can 'keep the things that hurt to myself alone. They can be my secret indulgence' (*Rebecca*, p. 11). Unhampered by the supervision of servants, the responsibilities of family, or the care of children, the narrator of *Rebecca* can think her own thoughts, live in her own private, interior spaces, free from the dictates of a certain form of middle-class femininity. Indeed, the narrator's ambivalence about the demands of her social role are alluded to early in the novel. She waves and smiles as the car passes the woman who lives in Manderley's lodge house. The woman confirms the narrator's sense of invisibility and non-existence. 'She stared at me blankly. I don't think she knew who I was.' (*Rebecca*, p. 133) At the end of the novel the narrator exists only in transient social spaces that she briefly inhabits. It is her dreams and the story she tells that confirm her existence and make her visible thus rendering her knowable only through her inner psyche and not via her social role.

The figure of Rebecca may offer an imagined version of inexpressible female desires: the mature second Mrs de Winter offers an alternative form of autonomous female selfhood. If Rebecca's independent, sexually adventurous femininity appears attractive to twenty-first century readers, we might speculate on the social and cultural changes that permit such imaginings. Readers in the 1930s may have found certain, historically specific pleasures in the self-contained solitude of the second Mrs de Winter. Virginia Woolf

yearned for 'a room of her own', hated the demands that servant-keeping imposed on her and fended off attempts to break down her self-imposed reserve.<sup>19</sup> In an early story written in 1906 Woolf contrasts the lives of two sets of women. Phyllis and Rosamund who live in Kensington visit the Tristrams who live in Bloomsbury. The Tristram sisters lead a less conventional life and the freedom of their conversation leads Phyllis to an uncharacteristic outburst. Afterwards Phyllis reflects that, although the conversation had stimulated her, 'in penetrating to her real self [she] had let in some chill gust of air to that closely guarded place'.<sup>20</sup> Jan Struther's Mrs Miniver, as Light has argued, offered a version of middle-class femininity that prized self-containment and disliked, what was seen, as Victorian 'gush' or sentiment, preferring what she called the 'bare and laconic'.<sup>21</sup> Reflecting on her dislike of country house visits Mrs Miniver observes that 'it wasn't shyness. It was more like a form of claustrophobia – a dread of exchanging the freedom of her own self-imposed routine for the inescapable burden of somebody else's'.<sup>22</sup> Daphne Du Maurier, herself, prized solitude because it released her from the 'acting' that she found herself doing all the time, 'every word she spoke, every gesture she made seemed to her rehearsed even when she was most at ease. Alone with no one to act for, the relief was great and with this relief came a sense of exhilaration: *now* she knew who she was, could be herself.'<sup>23</sup> Certainly, as these examples demonstrate, there is evidence in women's writing of the period that material and emotional privacy was a deeply felt desire of middle class women.

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Celia Fremlin is probably better known as a writer of psychological thrillers and the author of *War Factory*, a Mass Observation study of morale amongst women workers in a rurally located Second World War factory.<sup>24</sup> Fremlin, the daughter of a Hertfordshire doctor turned bacteriologist, graduated from Oxford in 1936 with a classics degree ('Greats') and little idea about what she wanted to do next. Whilst at Oxford she had been a member of the Communist Party although on her own admission she did not hold strong convictions, 'everybody who was anybody was in the Communist Party . . . that was where all the fun was'.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, she thought that her Communist Party friends talked 'what sounded like rubbish about working-class life' and she was keen to find out 'what it really was like'.<sup>26</sup> As a result she decided to try working as a domestic servant and from 1937 to 1939 she moved from job to job in search of different experiences of service. *The Seven Chars of Chelsea* was the result. Part social survey and part fictional account of her experiences, the text's direction and purpose is elusive, at times political polemic, at others comic anecdote. A year earlier, the novelist, Monica Dickens, had published an account of her time as a cook-general, *One Pair of Hands*.<sup>27</sup> Fremlin's account has a sharper political edge but it frequently adopts a similar tone in

which cooks, 'chars' and maids are 'characters' to be milked for comic effect. Nevertheless, the publication of such accounts like *One Pair of Hands*, written to amuse a middle-class readership, did make visible the existence of the conditions for which Fremlin struggled to find solutions.

*The Seven Chars of Chelsea* is written in part as documentary realism and following social observers such as George Orwell, or the filmmaker, John Grierson, draws on the newly established methods of anthropology and ethnography.<sup>28</sup> Fremlin's hypothesis is that the worlds of mistress and servant are so divided that any informal or friendly relationship between the two is impossible, 'you speak two different languages; you think different thoughts; you live in different worlds.' (*Seven Chars*, p. 2) The gulf between servant and mistress is as great as that between Pacific islanders and the anthropologists who study them, or as that between the miners of Wigan and Orwell who describes them with a mixture of fascination and disgust. One of the purposes of the book is to offer mistresses insights into the psychology of their servants in the hope that this will create greater understanding on the part of mistresses and thus better working conditions. In order to achieve this Fremlin acts, to some extent, as an advocate for those whom her text scrutinises. Fremlin's self-consciousness about her own position *vis à vis* the subjects of her research and the middle-class women for whom she writes but from whom she distances herself, constantly raises the question of who precisely is being scrutinised by whom. Seen in this light ethnographic documentary not only reveals and scrutinises the 'unfamiliar' but defamiliarises the known, turning its searching gaze on mistress and servant alike. Moreover, the documentary impulse evidenced by Fremlin's use of the tropes and vocabulary of anthropological ethnography is never allowed to achieve the status of dominant discourse. *The Seven Chars of Chelsea* is constituted from a medley of languages and positions that effectively destabilises any possibility of a single polemic and thus functions to subvert the aspirations of documentary reportage. Fremlin's attempts to document and debate the conditions of domestic service are constantly undermined by her delight in creating characters, recounting anecdotes and evoking mood, practices that alert us to the ways in which documentary accounts are themselves acts of representation that are indebted to the narrative and descriptive vocabularies more usually associated with the literary.

*The Seven Chars of Chelsea* begins with three case studies of situations taken by the author: residential general maid in an upper-class home with a large staff; general maid in a boarding house run by a working-class woman, and cleaner in a hospital. These chapters are written as fictional narratives with a cast of characters, dialogue and plots and contrast sharply with the later chapters which attempt to analyse the problems of domestic service using examples from her various experiences. The book's central chapter entitled 'The Seven Chars of Chelsea' is a comic account of Fremlin's time as a cleaner in a hospital. The 'chars' are represented as stoical, phlegmatic,

characters, apparently indifferent to the conditions of their lives who react to events with humour and fatalism. They act and move in chorus and they bicker good-heartedly throughout the day. The depiction of the 'chars' draws on a certain middle-class myth of working-class vigour and phlegm that has its masculine counterpart in the figure of the British Tommy but they are also intended to enact a role similar to that of the chorus in Greek tragedy, commenting on the main action. The vitality which characterises the 'chars' (and the waitresses that are described in a later chapter) is in sharp contrast to the wasted lives that Fremlin claims are the lot of the residential servant. And this, she states, was the point of the book. 'The point I wanted to make a lot was that these girls [residential servants] were not getting married . . . the work itself was not unpleasant at all compared with a lot of work'.<sup>29</sup>

When the text turns to examining residential service there is a shift in register and idiom: the comic and choric mode used to present the daily cleaners and waitresses gives way to something approaching the Gothic intensity of Du Maurier's rendering of Mrs Danvers. The residential household is described as a 'nightmare boarding-school, full of children slowly growing grey' in which the female servants are represented as occupying a psychosexual landscape of suppressed desire and wasted potential (*Seven Chars*, p. 148). Trapped in the structures of deference and duty, intimacy and isolation, doomed not to marry, these servants live, according to Fremlin, sterile and purposeless lives in which an obsessive devotion to cleanliness and order has replaced the 'natural' outlets for female desire. Her description of a visit to Agnes, a retired family servant is illustrative,

She [Agnes] lived in a little house deep in the woods . . . Inside the garden, shut off by the garden fence from the wilderness of leaves and scents and sounds, her geraniums were doing very well, row upon row of them, without a single weed.

Inside the house was silent. No wasps were ever heard buzzing after Agnes's jam; no flies hummed hopefully round her larder door. The wire netting on her windows was completely effective. The last mouse had been trapped years ago, and now the whole house stood trim and silent. Its barricades against the surge of life were impregnable.

We knocked on the brass knocker, and Agnes came to the door. She was tall and erect, and her face was clammily white, with few wrinkles for her seventy years. She wore an old-fashioned black dress of very good material, a tight lace front and choker, and her hair was grey and wisp-like. You could not tell what colour it had once been. (*Seven Chars*, p. 151)

Like Mrs Danvers, Agnes displays a sensuous and possessive pleasure in commodities and furnishings. She shows her visitors the material from which she intends to make new curtains, 'stroking it with strange relish, letting her thin fingers slide across its folds' and describes a damaging mark on her furniture thus,

“I don’t know how it is with my furniture, I can feel everything that touches it, just as if it was my own flesh. But I got some oil and put it on, straight away, and rubbed it, ever so gentle, you know, not to rough the polish. I rub it several minutes every day, and it’s getting better, I know it’s getting better.” Her voice had grown soft, and she stooped and felt the injured patch with all the pent-up tenderness of seventy years. (*Seven Chars*, p. 156)

This attachment to material belongings on the part of servants is represented by Du Maurier as powerful and seductive. Mrs Danvers’ obsessive housekeeping of Rebecca’s bedroom encodes a subtext of dangerous eroticism. Fremlin, on the other hand, treats Agnes with gentle pathos using her as an example of the psychological damage occasioned by a life in residential service. Agnes who lives ‘deep in the woods’ has lost the power to bewitch and can only measure out her days by cleaning and polishing her treasured pieces of furniture. Nevertheless, Agnes’ obsessive behaviour is represented as ‘abnormal’ and thus slightly sinister. In this Fremlin draws on contemporary narratives of single women. Ludovici’s attitude, drawing on a popularised version of Freudian theory, was extreme but his perception of celibacy as ‘unnatural’ was not,

spinsters . . . who are not leading natural lives, and whose fundamental instincts are able to find no normal expression or satisfaction . . . the influence of this body of spinsters on the life of the nation to which they belong, must be abnormal, and therefore contrary to the normal needs and the natural development of the nation.<sup>30</sup>

Sex was celebrated amongst certain groups in the 1930s as ‘one of the fundamental elements of life, and without it no life is simple or normal’.<sup>31</sup> Victorian attitudes to sex were seen as outdated and repressive, but nonetheless sexual relationships outside marriage remained confined to a small ‘emancipated’ minority. Hence, to lead a ‘natural’ life required marriage and those women who, through circumstance or choice, did not marry, were at best pitied and at worst condemned as pathologically abnormal. Thwarted sexuality has become a powerful and destructive anger in Mrs Danvers; in Agnes it has produced passivity and an obsession with cleanliness: both women are represented as ‘hysterical’. Fremlin concludes her discussion of residential service by asking what Agnes and her married hospital ‘chars’ could possibly have to say to each other and the implication is clear: not only are the worlds of mistress and maid utterly different, so too are the worlds of residential servant and daily ‘char’.

The rhetoric of *The Seven Chars of Chelsea* sets up an opposition between the traditional and the modern that is experienced as a particular form of class relations between women. The qualities asked of residential servants (deference, loyalty and celibacy) are pathologised as the cause of a ‘neurotic’ and ‘hysterical’ femininity that harks back to what is perceived as an outdated

mode of service and repressive sexuality. A 'modern' form of working-class femininity, epitomised by the 'chars' and waitresses is represented as robust, independent and non-deferential. The residential woman servant, according to Fremlin, is a legacy of the past who,

may remain safe and secure all her life long, out of hearing of the battles and storms that the rest of the working-class are facing . . . she will be living in the world of feudalism, whose battles are long past; while the others of her class are living in the fighting, struggling world of capitalism. (*Seven Chars*, p. 150)

It is difficult not to see these residential servant figures, at least in part, as projections of their creator's fears and anxieties about traditional femininity. Fremlin rejected the conventional life of a middle-class daughter, choosing instead to work as a single woman in London. In many ways she identifies with the urban waitresses and 'chars' rather than the suburban mistresses and residential servants with whom she works. For Fremlin class is a fluid category whose boundaries are more permeable than many narratives allowed. 'Modern' working-class women, as well as the middle-class mistresses for whom she writes, are active agents in the rapidly changing world of modern capitalism and she positions herself as a mediator or messenger between them.

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The distinction between *Rebecca* and *The Seven Chars of Chelsea* signalled by generic conventions (*Rebecca* follows the patterns of Gothic romance, *The Seven Chars of Chelsea* purports to offer something akin to documentary realism) is a much less stable one than might be supposed. Whilst *Rebecca* expresses an interior landscape of desire and yearning, the stated purpose of *The Seven Chars of Chelsea* is to inform, exemplify and analyse a specific social reality. Yet Du Maurier's novel, despite its focus on individual subjectivity, is firmly located in the social conditions that produced it and from which the de Winters escape at the end. The story of *Rebecca* may have a continuing appeal but it is not timeless. It is historically grounded in the specific social circumstances from which middle-class women's subjectivities were shaped. Moreover, the emphasis on interiority and selfhood, the tension between autocracy and democracy, between authority and deference, between private space and public obligations, and between desire and duty are 'modern' concerns. Du Maurier's imagination may, as Light has argued, be conservative.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, it is one which speaks of and to women at a time when discussions of modernity frequently rendered women's experiences and understandings invisible. *The Seven Chars of Chelsea*, whilst purporting to describe and record essential features of the social system of domestic service, draws upon a range of representational devices. Metaphors,

narrative structure and classificatory systems serve to produce understandings of how class and gender are constituted in the domestic organisation of the middle-class home. To the extent that Fremlin offers a socialist solution to the problems raised by domestic service and is concerned to break down barriers between the classes she does not share Du Maurier's conservative vision. The vision offered by *The Seven Chars of Chelsea* is progressive and future-oriented unlike *Rebecca* which enacts in its telling a journey into history, the past and memory. Nonetheless, both texts articulate and negotiate a mixture of discomfort and satisfaction with the promises of modernity as manifested in that heartland of English private life – the middle class home. On the one hand, the refusal of women to enter domestic service as alternative occupations became available threatened the collapse of a social system based on deference, servility, authority and breeding. On the other hand, Du Maurier and Fremlin, like others of their class and generation, were aware that 'modern' relations between servant and employer required recognition of equal status and an equal humanity. Caught between the (?guilty) desire to maintain a known social system that offered certain forms of power and control, and an equally fraught anxiety about how to democratise what was self-evidently hierarchical, many middle-class women in the 1930s must have felt themselves to be inadequate and reluctant midwives at the birth of new forms of domesticity. And if one of the paradigmatic experiences of modernity is a tension between the desire for individual fulfilment, growth and development, and an equally powerful imperative towards democracy, community and collectivity, then in the struggles of bourgeois women to solve 'the servant problem' it is possible to see a version of this conflict that was specific to women. The middle-class woman by virtue of her sex and class is confined to seeking answers in the very space (the private home) that masculine accounts of modern life consistently envision as either a timeless refuge from the pain of modern living or as the stifling place of tradition and stasis from which modernity offers escape. The texts of Du Maurier and Fremlin inscribe the bourgeois home as neither refuge nor prison but as a complex space in which the dynamics of traditional and modern relationships are played out in all their historical specificity.

#### Notes

1 Daphne Du Maurier, *Rebecca* (first published 1938: this edition, London, 1975), p. 176. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.

2 M. Wings, 'Rebecca Redux: Tears on a Lesbian Pillow', in L. Gibbs (ed.), *Daring to Dissent* (London, 1994).

3 C. Fremlin, *The Seven Chars of Chelsea* (London, 1940). All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.

4 V. Brittain, *Women's Work in Modern England* (London, 1928); E. Griffiths, *Modern Marriage and Birth Control* (London, 1935); Northcliffe Press, *Modern Woman*, (London, circa 1930).

5 R. Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), p. 16. See also M. Nava, 'Modernity's Disavowal: Women, the City and the Department Store', in M. Nava and A. O'Shea (eds), *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity* (London, 1996); D. L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity*, (Oxford, 2000); E. Wilson, 'The Invisible Flâneur', *New Left Review*, 191 (1992), 90–110; J. Wolff, 'The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2:3 (1985), 37–46.

6 See M. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London, 1983); T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer (1947/1979), *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London, 1979); W. Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London, 1973); G. Simmel, 'The metropolis and mental life', in his *On Individuality and Social Forms*, (Chicago, Ill., 1971)

7 Felski, *Gender of Modernity*, p. 10.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 21

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18, 21–2,

10 C. Dyhouse, *Feminism and the Family in England 1880–1939* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 107–44.

11 Wings, 'Rebecca Redex', discusses the relationship between Mrs Danvers and Rebecca in terms of its lesbian coding but does not consider the class positions of the various characters. Roger Bromley reads *Rebecca* as a response to the financial and political crises of the 1930s but, perhaps surprisingly, has little to say about the way in which the figure of the servant housekeeper functions in the reproduction of the bourgeois hegemony in which he claims *Rebecca* is implicated. R. Bromley, 'The Gentry, Bourgeois Hegemony and Popular Fiction: *Rebecca* and *Rogue Male*', in P. Humm, P. Stigant and P. Widdowson (eds), *Popular Fictions: Essays in Literature and History* (London, 1986). Alison Light addresses the ways in which *Rebecca* explores the pleasures and constraints of domesticity and femininity for women in the 1930s but does not examine the role of Mrs Danvers in the novel. A. Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London, 1991), pp. 156–207.

12 M. Forster, *Daphne Du Maurier* (London, 1994), pp. 27–9, 221–222.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 222.

14 At boarding school in Camposena, France, when she was eighteen, Daphne felt herself to be in danger of being 'pathetic': she felt herself to be lacking social status, her French was not very good and she disliked being anonymous and marginalised. She quickly forced herself to join, uninvited, the favoured clique of the senior mistress, Mlle Yvon, with whom she as quickly became infatuated. *Ibid.*, p. 25–41, 276.

15 F. Jack and P. Preston, *The Woman's Book*, (London, circa 1930), p. 332.

16 Forster *Daphne Du Maurier*, pp. 6–9.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 58–60.

18 Jack and Preston, *Woman's Book*, p. 36.

19 H. Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London, 1997), pp. 253–6, p. 605.

20 V. Woolf, 'Phyllis and Rosamund', in S. Dick (ed.), *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf* (London, 1985), p. 24.

21 Light, *Forever England*, pp. 113–55; J. Struther, *Mrs Miniver* (London, 1989), p. 23.

22 Struther, *Mrs Miniver*, pp. 38–39.

23 Forster, *Daphne Du Maurier*, p. 58.

24 C. Fremlin, *War Factory*, (London, 1987)

25 Interview with Angus Calder, 17 March 1980, University of Sussex, Mass Observation Archive.

26 Interview with Nick Stanley, 18 September 1981, University of Sussex, Mass Observation Archive.

27 M. Dickens, *One Pair of Hands* (London, 1939).

28 The book was reviewed favourably in the *News Chronicle* by Tom Harrisson, the anthropologist and founder of Mass Observation. As a result Fremlin was invited by Harrisson to become an observer with Mass Observation.

29 Interview with Stanley, Mass Observation Archive.

30 A. M. Ludovici, *Woman: A Vindication* (London, 1923), p. 231.

31 I. Clephane, *Towards Sex Freedom* (London, 1935), p. 212.

32 Light, *Forever England*, pp. 157–207.

#### Address for Correspondence

Judy Giles, School of Arts, York St John College, Lord Mayor's Walk, York YO1 7EX, UK. E-mail: [j.giles@yorksj.ac.uk](mailto:j.giles@yorksj.ac.uk)