

WRITING THE MEAN: PHYLLIS MCGINLEY AND AMERICAN DOMESTICITY

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For Mom and Dad

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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American 20th century poet Phyllis McGinley was a prolific writer and publisher throughout her career (roughly 1920-1960), finding coveted space in both popular and academic magazines like the *Ladies' Home Journal* and the *New Yorker*. McGinley was known in the literary circles as a brilliant light verse poet, specializing in humor and satire. But despite her productive career, McGinley was neglected by the second-wave feminist critics even as they sought to recover and expand new female writers like Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich. As a result, McGinley has become virtually unknown in contemporary scholarship and has faded from cultural memory. Why has she been rendered so invisible to academia?

My thesis answers this question by examining the perceived limitations of McGinley's poetry and prose within *LHJ* and the *NY*. I posit that McGinley's ignored status stems partly from her own recognition of herself as a domestic "housewife poet" before the more liberal Anne Sexton popularized the term. As postwar domesticity became taboo for feminist critics, McGinley audaciously embraced the housewife. She also chose to write in formalized light verse when the emerging modernist and avant-garde movements in poetry focused on free verse and serious philosophical issues. By labeling herself as housewife poet and continuing to use light verse, McGinley was stigmatized as a matronly comical poetess, whose writing refused to take

seriously the bonds that feminist critics were working to break through. She was, rather, writing the mean, taking ideas from both traditional values and contemporary women's rights to create a hybrid, or a both/and, option for women in America.

This thesis' evidence is limited to 1950s America, as this decade is both the golden age of the American housewife and the prime of McGinley's career. Through her work McGinley offers compromise to fifties housewives; she gives them hope, she gives them reason, and above all she gives them humor.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

To be a housewife is a difficult, a wrenching, sometimes an ungrateful job if it is looked on only as a job. Regarded as a profession, it is the noblest as it is the most ancient of the catalogue. Let none persuade us differently or the world is lost indeed.

—Phyllis McGinley, *Sixpence in Her Shoe*

American 20th century poet Phyllis McGinley was a prolific writer and publisher throughout her career (roughly 1920-1970), finding coveted space in both popular and highbrow magazines like the *Ladies' Home Journal* and the *New Yorker*. She even won the Pulitzer Prize in 1961 for *Times Three (selected poems)*. Aside from her sheer volume of textual production, McGinley was also known in the literary circles as a brilliant light verse poet, specializing in humor and satiric tone. But despite her dynamic career, McGinley was neglected by second-wave feminist literary critics even as they sought to bring her postwar contemporaries Adrienne Rich and Sylvia Plath into the canon. As a result, McGinley has become virtually unknown in contemporary scholarship. Why has she been rendered so invisible in the academy?

My thesis answers this question by examining and returning to McGinley's poetry and prose to question the limited perceptions of her work. I posit that McGinley's neglected status stems from two major issues: she does not fit reigning models of women's poetry or postwar poetry, and she adopts light verse. McGinley embraces domesticity at the start of second-wave feminism while she eschews free verse amidst the rise of both modernist avant-garde poetry and confessional poetry. And yet, McGinley needs to be included among major women poets because her bridging of both *LHJ*'s and the *NY*'s presentation of postwar domesticity complicates the image of the housewife poet. McGinley was what I will term writing the mean. She offered American women an option in between the fictitious perfect housewife and poets

who rebelled against domesticity. She created a both/and position for homemaking women to occupy, negotiating the space that had yet to be defined.

The peak of McGinley's career coincides with the stereotypical golden age of the American housewife; thus, I will focus on the decade of 1950-1960. I must clarify that McGinley's targeted audience was, like Betty Friedan's, white, middle-class, and educated women (a major constituency of *LHJ*'s demographic). These women of the 1950s were dichotomously labeled either super-heroine suburban moms managing to raise respectful children and have a full course dinner waiting for their bread-winning husbands, or they were liberated and enlightened intellectuals fighting for feminist rights—take your pick ladies, June Cleaver, or Sylvia Plath. Although recent criticism, headed by Elaine Tyler May, continually revises traditional history to show how fifties housewives were actually breaking out of their domestic containment instead of existing passively within it, the only internal motive posited is often boredom or unhappiness with domestic roles. McGinley, in writing the mean, expands the either Cleaver or Plath, happy or bored, binary and creates a multifaceted identity, modeling not a limited choice for women, but rather a merged alternative—the mean between two extremes. In her masterful light verse style, embedded in literary tradition, McGinley fashioned a self-given dual label and refused to be categorized as either housewife or poet, opting instead for “housewife poet” long before Sexton popularized the term. Unlike Sexton, McGinley was not being ironic or self-deprecating, she was choosing a professional career. “Housewife poet” was not a label to be denigrated or mocked; it was an honorable and purposefully constructed identity. McGinley resolutely chose to write the mean and marketed herself as such; thus she must complicate our current notions of postwar American domesticity.

A Critical Survey

McGinley's own bridged status as a housewife and poet becomes clearer when we look at her biography. Born in 1905, McGinley graduated from the University of Utah and moved to New York in 1929, where she simultaneously taught high school English and published poetry. She married Charles L. Hayden in 1936, and had her first child, Julie, by 1939 and a second, Patsy, in 1941. Traversing both personal and professional expectations, McGinley was an educated, published writer with a college degree, yet she still had two kids, a husband, and an in-home job. She portrayed traditional domesticity while she became quite invested in her poetry. She also had the money to hire a maid/nanny, creating more time for her poetic profession. Extending into pop culture and literary culture, McGinley published eight volumes of poetry, as well as individual poems published in acclaimed magazines such as *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Saturday Evening Post*. Magazines like *Ladies' Home Journal (LHJ)* and *The New Yorker (NY)* reveal the breadth of McGinley's work. A best-selling popular poet from the 1930s-1960s, McGinley won both the Edna St. Vincent Millay Memorial Award in 1954 for *The Love Letters of Phyllis McGinley*, and the Pulitzer Prize in 1961 for *Times Three* (selected poems). In addition to the books of poetry, McGinley also wrote children's books and a collection of prose essays, *The Province of the Heart* (1959), in which she published her opinions of American social codes and traditions, gracefully yet persistently embracing domesticity as a worthy institution.

Though McGinley has long since ceased to be a best-selling author, she was quite popular throughout her own career. J.D. McCarthy comments on McGinley's recognition in one of the few books inclusive of her work, *Ogden Nash, Dorothy Parker, and Phyllis McGinley*: "So popular was her work, and so canny were her portraits of middle-class matrons, their hapless husbands and conniving children, that for two generations McGinley's work—her books flew off

the shelves, tens of thousands of copies at a time—was as well-known and as well-heeded as anyone's" (McCarthy 43). McGinley's popularity with middle class wives and mothers most likely added to her scorn from critics. Few popular works and popular poets have been embraced critically by anyone other than consumers. Notwithstanding her current absence, she was a celebrated poet in her time.

“Housewife Poet”: Refusing Models of Women's and Postwar Poetry

Whereas feminist literary critics targeted postwar domesticity as inscribing female containment, McGinley audaciously claimed herself a “housewife poet,” immediately stigmatizing herself to them as the matronly poetess heralding domestic containment. Contrary to her marked reputation as an average poet, however, McGinley was actually crafting a much more complex, critical voice/viewpoint of modern literary history. She combined the label of housewife with that of poet and created a merged identity. McGinley refused to be just “housewife” while she denied being solely a poet. Crafting verse that was domestic in content but formal in poetic structure, McGinley marketed herself as the witty author of poems like “Calendar for Parents,” which was published in the February 1952 issues of *LHJ*. In this amusing poem, McGinley transforms the monotony of raising children into a comical, yet still realistic, rant:

Call the birthday party off:
Junior's down with the whooping cough...

Let no Christmas kin invite us,
That's our date for tonsillitis...

Lives there tot with health so firm
He never harbored festal germ?

If such there be, God save his powers,
But he's not chick nor child of ours. (McGinley, “Calendar...” 1-2, 7-8, 14-16)

This poem laughingly comments on domestic life while occasionally alternating to a serious critical tone. It is clear, however, that “Calendar for Parents” is a domestic poem, embracing the family and motherhood as worthy content. McGinley comically depicts fifties family life as one that revolves solely around the children, showcasing humor and illustrating both the burden and joy of kids, the sparkling and the dirty sides of being a housewife. As William Young and Nancy Young state in *The 1950s*, “Having children was touted as the highest form of happiness; a woman fulfilled herself by bearing children” (Young 7). McGinley was aware of this reigning idea through her own experience as a mother and a writer. She made a savvy marketing choice to embrace domesticity in the fifties, producing content and context in poetry that would sell. McGinley knew her public audience and fashioned her poetry to meet the needs of her readers. Yet, one can see how a poem like “Calendar for Parents” might be abandoned by feminist critics who were fighting against the containment of women as housewives. To them, McGinley’s poetry was doubly old-fashioned, both in ideals and in rhyming couplet form.

One such critic, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 right as McGinley’s career began to fade from memory. But Friedan sought to identify issues and publicly address conclusions that were already prevalent in the 1950s. Like McGinley, Friedan addressed white middle class, educated women, but she viewed professionalized housewifery as incredibly limited and contained, stifling women’s potential and allowing them only “insular domesticity” (Friedan 51). Faulting “women’s magazines...advertisements, televisions, movies, [and] novels” (43), as instigators of “the problem that has no name” (19), Friedan famously proclaimed for housewives, “We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says, ‘I want something more than my husband and my children and my home’” (32). Friedan documented the

majority of white, middle-class housewives as unhappy and unsatisfied with their roles.

According to her evidence, fifties ads suffocated women by creating unachievable ideals and prompting the feminine mystique. Such was the other choice for women—either embrace your inner June Cleaver, or recognize your suffering and turn to a new occupation.

Writers like McGinley who embraced domestic ideals did not fit in Freidan's view of women's poetry because Friedan saw McGinley as stifling women's options, and promoting unhappy housewifery. Friedan comments about domestic women writers:

... a new breed of women writers began to write about themselves as if they were "just housewives," reveling in a comic world of children's pranks and eccentric washing machines and Parents' Night at the PTA... When Shirley Jackson, who all her adult life has been an extremely capable writer, pursuing a craft far more demanding than bedmaking, and Jean Kerr, who is a playwright, and Phyllis McGinley, who is a poet, picture themselves as housewives, they may or may not overlook the housekeeper or maid who really makes the beds. But they implicitly deny the vision, and the satisfying hard work involved in their stories, poems, and plays. They deny the lives they lead, not as housewives, but as individuals (Friedan 57).

Friedan saw these "Housewife Writers" (57) as a group of women duping their readers by offering them temporary humor. She credits McGinley as a "good craftsman," but criticizes her for lending no substantial ideas to change the majority of housewives lives.

In her questionings, Friedan found the educated women in suburbia to be living problematic situations. In her book *A Feminist Critique*, Cassandra Langer describes Friedan's issue as one of untapped potential: "Rarely did they [housewives] have the energy to pursue professional careers, take university courses, or fulfill their creative possibilities in any way. When they complained of feeling listless or told their doctors their lives were pointless, they were told to take Miltown or Valium, buy a new dress, or try a new hairstyle" (Langer 132). Housewifery, for Friedan, limited women to the contained role of mother/housekeeper/wife, offering them no option for progressing their own interests and careers—the presumed highest achievement—and instead leaving them with the presumed misery of housework. From this

perspective, McGinley seemed to be only critically useful as a target example of “domestic poet.”

Contrary to McGinley’s liminal scholarly status, Sylvia Plath is enshrined as a poet of domesticity. Plath has become “one of America’s major poets” and “literature’s great commodity” (Bryant 17), whereas McGinley has been ignored. Plath began publishing at the height of McGinley’s career, also using magazines like *LHJ* and the *NY* as a marketplace. McGinley and Plath actually appeared in the same *LHJ* December 1959 issue, McGinley publishing “Office Party” and Plath publishing “The Second Winter.” McGinley published multiple children’s books; Plath wrote a children’s book but couldn’t get it placed. Plath authored many poems referencing domesticity, often mocking the role of housewife, but nonetheless shaping it. In “Plath, Domesticity, and the Art of Advertising” Marsha Bryant proposes Plath as an author who “[l]ike ads...explores performative as well as mechanical dimensions of domesticity. She draws the reader into the intimate spaces of the home (kitchen, bedroom, nursery), only to reveal a stage” (Bryant 22). Also in the middle of second-wave feminism, Plath could be embraced by feminist critics because she revealed the ludicrous performativity of the perfect housewife. Women writers like Plath were precursors to the official movement eventually placed alongside Betty Friedan. McGinley, Plath’s literary equal and rival, was not as clearly aligned with feminist revisions. Considered, perhaps, a more highly skilled poet due to her intense verse and own marginal existence, Plath has long been part of the literary canon. Even while tackling domestic issues, we can safely assume she would have balked at the label “housewife” poet, and though Plath published satirical verse and poems about domesticity, she rarely, if ever, wrote light verse. Plath even commented in her journal, “Phyllis McGinley is

out—light verse: she’s sold herself” (Plath 360). Clearly, Plath thought little of McGinley and her work.

McGinley, it seems, was purposefully ignored in lieu of writers like Plath and Friedan, too much of a housewife for many feminist critics. Wagner’s *Phyllis McGinley* was even perhaps recognized and then passed over because McGinley’s work was still too domestic in 1970. She still seems to exist somewhat lodged in that category of average domestic poet, in conservative opposition to the radical labels of the aforementioned women. But her unique position in critical perspectives of literature and history cannot go unnoticed. McGinley is an important figure, complicating our notions of post-war and women’s poetry, and questioning how those canonical categories were constructed. A closer look at McGinley’s work amidst images of post-war domesticity will not allow her to be so easily stigmatized. Her poetry positions itself as a “mean” to the binary options for the 1950s housewife.

CHAPTER 2 MCGINLEY AND LIGHT VERSE

McGinley does not slot easily into models for women's or post-war poetry, but perhaps what made her work seem even more insignificant was her choice to write in light verse. The popular light verse market was a practical decision for McGinley as a professional poet and unofficial critic. As Wagner presents, McGinley's writing career began "when she discovered that the *New Yorker* paid higher rates for 'light' poetry than for 'serious.' That there was a demand for light verse was the important consideration for this young English teacher-turned-writer. She wanted to live from her writing; obviously she needed a market" (Wagner 15). McGinley fashioned herself around a market, advertising herself as a humorous housewife poet who could make light of routine responsibilities. Throughout her writing career this market continued to thrive, allowing McGinley to publish both skillful writing and social criticism. Therefore, McGinley was able to enjoy her own domestic role as housewife while practicing considerable talent in her literary label of poet.

But light verse deserves more credit as a highly polished form of poetry as well as a useful tool for McGinley. Though light domestic verse is often cast aside as insignificant, standing "just outside the categories by which verse received its accreditation" (Brunner 245), "[f]inding the right tone between acidity and blandness, drawing unexpected sources of wit from the banal, and exposing the absurd without seeming either cruel or whining is no small feat" (Fritzer and Bland 3). Like writing light verse, housewifery took seemingly effortless skill, nuance, and balance; it, too, required a balancing act of mother/housekeeper/hostess where wit and humor were employed just as much as in McGinley's poetry. Delicacy in awkward situations not only was the role of the hostess housewife, but also could be said of McGinley's verse as well. Both

professions benefit from perfect form and the ability to be light with one's feet. Writing in light verse may have been a more strategic choice for McGinley than we have yet to acknowledge.

Let us remember "Calendar for Parents" and its primary goal to laugh at the monotony of raising children. Mothers who might have been forced to "Call the birthday party off" (1) because "Junior's down with the whooping cough" (2) needed the ability to laugh at ludicrous circumstances that forced them to stay within the house, within their domestic boundaries. When women didn't find perfection in domesticity, McGinley's humor allowed women to use her poetry as a model and a means of escape. In this poem, every major holiday and event revolve around the children who routinely get sick, brilliantly emphasized by McGinley's multisyllabic end rhymes—the plight of "us" cedes to "tonsillitis," the parental "powers" lend solely to the "child of ours." Borrowing formal rhyme and iambic tetrameter from high poetic form, McGinley places parents at the whims of their children's health. The speaker's imperative commands allow no room for discussion of priorities. Using generic names like "Junior" and "Sister," McGinley markets her poem to every mother. A mother and wife herself, McGinley, also confronted with the image of happy housewife, proceeds to make fun of it. Yet, underlying the comic surface lies a true frustration with children who do routinely become ill and force changes in plans. Well-versed in the sacrifices of motherhood, McGinley offers comedy and poetry to counter expected routine. The comical domestic verse allows McGinley to unveil the drudgery and frustrations of housewives without looking unacceptable as a bad mother who is not always fulfilled by her children.

Many poets preceding McGinley dabbled in humor writing, including canonized names like Emily Dickinson or Edna St. Vincent Millay. W.H. Auden, who introduced McGinley's Pulitzer Prize winning volume *Times Three*, also wrote light verse and offered his own quasi-

definition: ““There is a certain way of writing which one calls light, but underneath it can carry a great depth of emotion”” (Wagner 36). These poets, already secure in their own tradition, recognized the skill in creating light domestic verse and were still applauded with critical attention. McGinley wrote brilliant light verse, often in perfect form and rhyme, manipulating almost every poetic form and technique. There is no denying her skill. But more importantly, similarly to those light verse masters before her, she used the medium to espouse her views on society.

Based on the context in which her poetry was published, McGinley used light verse to subtly rebuke the images and ads that were surrounding her poetry. She mocked the advertised elegant perfection of a housewife and comically described routine household duties. McGinley once labeled her own work with a defensive spout: ““There’s a hell of a lot of straight social criticism”” (18). Despite the comic overtones, she overtly saw her writing as more than entertaining humor. She said again, in 1960, “It wasn’t until Wordsworth that there was this great dividing line between ‘serious’ poetry and ‘light verse’” (41). This added to her earlier comment in 1954: “What I have been consciously trying to do recently—ever since I’ve had enough confidence to consider myself a poet—is to narrow the gulf between ‘light’ and ‘serious’ verse. One other thing: I always try to share with my readers the immediacy of my own delight or despair of the world as I see it through my window” (41). McGinley seems to ask us herself to reconsider light verse as more than a witty way to make a living. The genre offered her the perfect mode of writing the mean. Couched in humor and wit, she could reveal housewifery as an honorable and skilled profession, a view that was not critically popular at the time, or at least became less so as she continued to write. Light verse gave her a wider and more popular audience while also adding to her domestic stigma as an average poet.

CHAPTER 3 MCGINLEY COMPLICATING THE IDEA OF HOUSEWIFE

Not only is McGinley's work in conflict with traditional models of women's and postwar poetry through her embrace of domesticity and use of light verse, but she also complicates the accepted view of the American 50s housewife. In order to see McGinley's intricate workings with this image, it is important to capture the cultural moment of the American housewife. In the 1950s, the nation stood at an unprecedented juncture after a nation-wide depression, two major world wars, and a recent booming economy. Such a roller coaster of events encouraged a national embrace of secure and moral values—home, family, and hard work. American women, fell directly within this new social desire by providing firm anchors of housewives and comforting nurturers in both reality and marketed images. Women, then, came to define themselves through this ongoing and increasingly emphasized role of housekeeper, mother, and wife.¹ Eugenia Kaledin encapsulates the status of women in *Daily Life in the United States*,

1940-1959 Shifting Worlds:

The high marriage and birth rates and the low divorce rate intertwined naturally with the “feminine mystique”—the idea that woman's fulfillment was in the home and nowhere else...They came slowly to realize that sex discrimination could be subtle as well as overt—even as they played the roles of wife and mother that society demanded. Most women were content for a time to make the most of these old-fashioned roles.² (Kaledin 103)

As new anchors of the nuclear family, women also became primary American consumers. Though women may have been temporarily content (or contained), as Kaledin points out, they also continued to recognize the housewife conundrum. Confronted with polished images, women

¹ Not to mention the unending list of other roles: cook, hostess, lover, etc.

² Kaledin continues to point out that many women were still working after World War II, but this paper will focus on that section of women who considered themselves housewives in work and in duty—those not currently employed outside of the household.

were commissioned to become perfect housewives though few had the means to achieve the advertised perfection even if it was theoretically achievable.

Advertisements in magazines like *LHJ* and the *NY* displayed glamorous images of housewifery on the same pages that McGinley published her poems. These cultural and contextual images of perfection perpetuated the idea of housewifery that both Friedan and McGinley countered through their own respective means. Radio, television, and movies (the same ones Friedan hated, McGinley too) produced image after image of the pristine housewife, firmly in control of herself, her house, and her family. While “popular media portrayed American women as possibly the best-dressed housekeepers ever seen” (Young 10), women were bombarded by the display of “elegant dresses, high heels, [and] jewelry” (10). Advertisements, especially, escalated this pristine housewife image to insist women “smile as they dust and vacuum” (10), even finding fulfillment in the drudgery of cleaning their homes. Presumably an unachievable model, the organized housewife marked the decade, sending an explicit guilty message to women, and leaving no room for error. If women’s houses weren’t as clean as the ones in the pictures, and women weren’t as happy about motherhood as the ever-persistent smiling faces were in the ads, they should feel guilty because they were unworthy housewives. McGinley will take specific issue with this idea. Again, in *The 1950s*, William Young and Nancy Young comment on a true extent of the message by illustrating how “[c]omfort’ and ‘convenience’ became the watchwords, and chores like cooking and cleaning got blended into a happy lifestyle. Kitchens—the multi-purpose command centers of many new suburban homes—merged with the laundry, dining, and family rooms, as fun and recreation became the focus of modern living” (Young 10-11). Some advertisements presented housewives that “even [wore] crowns” labeling “women as queens of domesticity” (11).

Most remember Frigidaire's "Queen for a Day" campaign that turned into a nationally broadcast television show in the fifties. This television series immortalized the housewife as a queen of domesticity. In the show, Jack Bailey interviewed four women

and whoever was in the worst shape—assessed by the audience “applause meter”—was crowned Queen For A Day... TV Guide called Bailey television's ‘No. 1 mesmerizer of middle-aged females and most relentless dispenser of free washing machines’...It was exactly what the general public wanted....We got what we were after. Five thousand Queens got what they were after. And the TV audience cried their eyes out, morbidly delighted to find there were people worse off than they were, and so they got what they were after.³

The chosen woman was literally “draped in a sable-trimmed red velvet robe and a jeweled crown” to publicly announce her ineptness as a housewife in addition to her publicized queendom. Fifties media offered unachievable expectations and guilt-laden models with few alternative images for women; housewifery was the epitome of success and happiness in life, not to mention a patriotic symbol of security amidst the looming Cold War.

Perhaps most importantly, however, magazine readership was imperative to the image of the 50s housewife, as most of the ads of perfection resided within their covers. Friedan specifically pointed fingers at magazines like *LHJ* as displaying happy housewives and overwhelming the average reader with a monthly onslaught of perfection while maintaining the national status quo.⁴ *LHJ* ranked at the top of widely read women's magazines; “over 5 million women... subscribed to the *Journal* in 1955” (Kaledin 103). Fifties women's magazines were not simply a place for the latest appliance ad or the most recent marriage column, but rather an entry into American society and an influence on it. Women bought *LHJ* because they saw

³All quotes taken from Shawn Hanley's paper at <http://history.sandiego.edu/gen/projects/hanley/queen.html>

⁴ Term taken from David Abrahamson, quoted in Walker's article: “because the large mass-circulation magazines were predicated on a sense of national community, all had an editorial interest in perpetuating the status quo (5)” (Walker 130).

themselves, as well as who they wanted to be, reflected in it. It was, in fact, “The Magazine Women Believed in.” Housewives were a popular subject of discussion. At the same time, *LHJ* also reflected changing social customs and codes, a guidebook for women and a mark of American culture.

Nancy Walker summarizes the impact of *LHJ* in her intriguing article, “The *Ladies’ Home Journal*, ‘How America Lives’ and the Limits of Cultural Diversity”:

[M]agazines for women are not the result of monolithic editorial visions, but instead the product of complex negotiations with a variety of cultural forces... Fluctuations in the economy brought about by the Depression, World War II rationing and shortages, and postwar prosperity affected everything from fashions to household design and technology. New products and new areas of expertise were reflected in articles and advice columns. Developments in medicine, child care, and education, not to mention changes in tastes and values, launched new features and series. Most importantly, of course, these magazines were (and are) businesses, heavily dependent upon advertising revenue for their continued existence. Not only do product manufacturers buy advertising space in periodicals whose readers are apt to be interested in the, but advertisements become part of the ‘message’ of the magazine.⁵ (Walker 30)

It is these advertised messages within the magazine that most glorified the happy housewife. I do not mean to suggest that *LHJ* solely presented the perfect housewife, nor do I mean to suggest that women solely aspired to become June Cleaver or Donna Reed. Many women, in fact, still held jobs after the Second World War, and many women voiced their discontent through responses to the content and material of *LHJ*. The magazine portrayed a mainstream domesticity, but it also published sections on domestic problems and concerns. I do posit, however, that the advertisements in magazines such as *LHJ* created the socially accepted view of the housewife, offering women the choice of either conforming to pristine images, or enduring the guilt of being

⁵ Walker continues astutely: “Rather than setting out to espouse a philosophy, then, the women’s magazines largely responded to an array of social, business, and even political institutions in determining what to publish. And even a cursory survey of the letters to the editor that the magazines printed demonstrates that readers were not uniformly brainwashed by what they read; they criticized the fiction, took issue with the advice offered by various experts, and questioned the perfectionist standards for home and family life that the magazines often projected” (Walker 130).

a bad housewife, a label we have already deemed as combining the multiple roles of mother, wife and hostess. Women weren't just bad housekeepers, they were triply disappointing throughout their lives. These magazines were shaping the image of post-war domesticity.

Combining her critical humor with the recognition of housewives as part of the “mean,” “Scientific Explanation of a Monday” (March 1954) provides a great example of McGinley both lauding housewifery and exploiting its drudgery, offering yet another layered view of both the rewards and the frustration that come with being a housewife. This poem is one we might expect to be in LHM based on its content. It presents a comically apt analysis of why Monday has become loathed by many housewives, emblematic of the day-to-day weekly solo routine that starts with the first household workday. The poet lists reasons Monday “can't abide existence” (18), as compared to other days of the week.

Stanza by stanza the poet systematically logs each day of the weekend with fun and routine events, culminating in her detailing of Monday as completely dull and meaningless. The speaker comments:

Saturday's a splendid day
With merriment ahead.
The day to pick a winner
Or to hie to country
climes.

Sunday's the intended day
For lying later in bed.
For church and early
dinner
And the puzzle in the
Times. (1-11)

Both Saturday and Sunday are weekend days, days when housewives would often have another parent at hand. These days exude merriment and relaxation—time for families to reconnect. The verse form mimics each day, spilling down to the one word marker of that day. Weekend trips

were common in the fifties, such as taking the family to drive-in movies, or up into “country climes” (4-5), for a brief outing. Sunday proves a relaxing day, time when even mothers perhaps could complete the Sunday “puzzle in the / Times” (10-11), showing her intellect by completing the hardest puzzle of the week. Remembering the context of *LHJ* and its audience, this poem reflects its audience’s competence and interest in the *Times* puzzle, indirectly touting women as smart and educated within their housewife roles. The poem also heralds housewives as being enjoyable active mothers and organizers of household events.

The poem follows with the comparative banal Monday, the day there’s “nothing in the mail” (20):

No word from my kinfolk, no
line from my dear.
Not even a postal with a “Wish
you were here.” (20-24)

The speaker longs for communication from those she holds dear—those outside her nuclear family—and becomes annoyed that Monday only brings what is, to her, unimportant mail. McGinley exalted relationships and used them as key centers for many of her poems, similar to other *LHJ* entries. This speaker clearly reveals her familial honor by missing communication with her family; it is not “Life’s Meaning” nor “Remorse” that produces the speaker’s lament, but her own intuition:

It’s my soul’s own warning
I have never known fail:
There’ll be nothing but a
Catalogue
Nothing but a Bank Statement
Nothing but a Tax Form
Monday morning in the mail.⁶ (33-39)

⁶ Poem as appears in the March 1954 issue of *LHJ*.

Monday is seemingly not preferable because there is “nothing in the mail” (20). Yet, again, the true annoyance comes with what is absent from the mail as well as what is in the mail. Family relations take precedence while tax forms and bank statements only symbolize the monotony of what the week will hold. The housewife, here, has been forgotten. She is heralded as fueling those relationships (children/husband) that she most misses, but she herself is unexcited about the week’s routine.

McGinley writes of the speaker’s frustration with Monday in a very comic tone, a tone which makes light the “[a]nger, pain, frustration, and weariness” within the housewife role, sloughed off to “counterattack” with a “just kidding” (Fritzer and Bland 3). Using light verse “demands that subject matter be familiar, that poems contain wit or humor, that language be immediately clear” (Wagner 27) thus McGinley uses a common construction of the days of the week and common conventions like getting the mail to illustrate a more powerful poetic position within the cultural and historical binary. The speaker in this poem may be relegated to the household, but she is very much aware of those things out of her domestic sphere, in charge of official paperwork. The light touch of McGinley’s work doesn’t weigh further on the routine of the house, but lightens the load of the housewife reading this poem. Her nuanced verse lines subtly emphasize the important and skilled roles of wives and mothers. With such a dexterous hand, McGinley is able to identify with housewives and recognize their toil while transforming routine into comedy.

Unlike Sylvia Plath, who was accepted by *LHJ* but continually rejected by the *NY* (she was eventually accepted in the *NY* but it took quite some time), McGinley used both *LHJ* and the *NY* for more publication locales. She wrote comedic light verse for the *NY*, but used the magazine as an area for more literary poems as well. A magazine that was also shaping post-war

domesticity, the *NY* was symbolically the intellectual opposite of *LHJ*. It was not considered “domestic,” nor was it traditionally marketed as a women’s magazine like *LHJ*. The fifties *NY* symbolized the scholarly, the witty intellectual, the wealthy and the cosmopolitan, creating a new space for domesticity. 1950s New York City was, indeed, the prime location for a cosmopolite, the center of a new superpower. Since post-war America boasted the acclaim of international superpower, *NYC* envisioned itself as the urban center of the world. Like the city itself, the *NY* represented the mobile flux of ideas, ideals, and identities across national borders contained within an urban setting. Distinctly urban 1950s cosmopolites (and specifically poets working within this cosmopolitan space) were governed by cultural icons that were not just national, but transnational as Jahan Ramazani claims in his essay “A Transnational Poetics.” Thus domesticity in the *NY* took shape different from images of housewifery in *LHJ*. McGinley would bridge aspects of both.

The *NY* was geared towards the upper/upper-middle white and educated class of society who could achieve and afford the glitz advertised in the magazine. Yet domestic ads still permeated the *NY*’s cosmopolitanism. Despite occasional misogynistic reader claims, the *NY*, too, recognized women as the primary consumers of the decade and incorporated ads with women in domestic scenes as a focal point. In fact, in *Defining New Yorker Humor*, Judith Yaross Lee posits women as the *NY*’s decisive primary audience from its beginning in 1925. Referring to the first full-page ads of the new created magazine, Lee comments, “[T]hese ads show that media buyers and the *New Yorker*’s advertising staff agreed on defining the *New Yorker* as a magazine for women. Full-page ads for cars, tires and other items addressed men directly, but ads targeting women outnumbered them. (47) Yet women do often penetrate ads traditionally directed towards men, with domesticity in the *NY* emerging as distinctly different

from traditional interpretations. Women sometimes defied the typical suburban housewife image. Whereas *LHJ* ads focused primarily on family and children within the home, the *NY* ads repositioned these subjects as people and families on the move. Fifties ads from the *NY* constantly portray vacations spots, automobile, airplanes, women preparing to go out. Women portrayed inside the home are often still embody the sexy housewife, but one less glamorous than Scott's queen. Few ads of household products can be found in the *NY*, virtually none center page. I do not mean to say that *LHJ* and the *NY* were complete opposites, that *LHJ* perpetuated the containment of women, and the *NY* did not. The *NY*, however, offers a glimpse of a different side of domesticity that is not included in the traditional generic definition. Fifties *New Yorker* domesticity, rather, was one of mobility and wealth incorporating housewives who also had night lives, mothers who went on trips with friends, educated women who worked and published. *Cosmopolitan*, *New Yorker* women were depicted routinely taking their families and domestic lives with them outside of the house and into the city.

Recovering McGinley as a complicated and complicating figure of post-war domesticity positions her as part of both *LHJ* and the *NY*. McGinley was, again, both a popular housewife (*LHJ*) and an intellectual poet (the *NY*), a best-selling author and a Pulitzer Prize winner. In *LHJ* McGinley published poems such as "Calendar for Parents" and "Landscape of Love," and prose pieces such as "The Honor of Being a Woman," where McGinley expands the traditional interpretations of the fifties housewife as pristine perfection to include the daily drudgery of housewifery as honorable, empowering and worthy of formal poetic attention. In *The New Yorker*, McGinley published routinely alongside canonized writers such as John Cheever and Adrienne Rich. She wrote more poetry for the *NY* and was perhaps more comfortable there, especially since the *NY* provided a greater market for humor writing. Indeed, some of her wittiest

poetry, “On the Prevalence of Literary Rivals,” and her most famous poem, “The Doll House,” appeared in the *NY* as McGinley continued to write on domestic issues at the peak of her career. But she was still a domestic writing in the *NY* too, publishing poems directly to housewives like “A Word to Hostesses.” Juxtaposing McGinley’s work in *LHJ/NY* reflects the magazine’s respective domesticities and reveals her as a figure who was complicating post-war domesticity, voicing a compromise in a time of social polarization. In both magazines, she used her light verse to allow women the option of personal occupations as well as the respectful occupation of housewife. She managed to carve a space for poems and prose that both embrace domesticity and laugh at its constructions. She wrote the mean, a compromise that most women enacted in everyday life, voicing their everyday struggles while providing not an either/or choice but a merged possibility: to be both woman and feminist, mother and professional, domestic and cosmopolitan. McGinley taught women to simultaneously embrace their roles as women and push at perceived boundaries.

McGinley found her niche in the *NY*. She loved the city and she was writing to readers who felt the same. Thus many of her poems found here distinctly locate her work in the cosmopolitan urban setting of *NY* domesticity both physically and intellectually. New York City often becomes central to the theme or content of her work, stylistically recurring most often in “real time” epigraphs. “Song of High Cuisine” was “Written upon reading in the New York Times that Bloomingdale’s grocery department now offers stuffed larks from the region of Carcassonne as well as one thrush from the French Alps.” The speaker mocks the elaborate offering of Bloomingdale’s inventory. The cosmopolitan choice of “tongues of foreign nightingales” (23) for dinner is just as over-the-top as the “Queen for a Day” television show. While seemingly intended for the sophisticated reader, this poem is also quite domestic as it

ponders dinner options. “A Threnody” displays the epigraph McGinley stipulates is from a *NY* ad (though this poem was not published in the *NY* itself)—“The new Rolls-Royce is designed to be owner driven. No chauffeur required.” The poem’s speaker then bids “Grandeur, farewell” (1), as she also says goodbye to the old-world ways now replaced by abundant appliances. Similarly heralding the urban center of New York, “Ode to an Institution” presents “The Museum of the City of New York” (15) complete with “somebody’s dance dress circa, ‘20” (42) and a “diorama” (25) of Central Park. And unveiling the true *NY* domesticity, she writes in “Mrs. Sweeney Among the Allegories” that this poem is “multi-level verses composed in a New Haven Railroad car immediately after having spent an afternoon with the Collected Poems of T.S. Eliot and an evening at The Confidential Clerk.” So, McGinley’s epigraphs unveil her poems from the start as simultaneously funny, cosmopolitan, and current.

Beyond the physical and obvious city-centered poetry, McGinley’s work also engaged with the intellectual expectations of scholarly cosmopolites. Many of her *NY* poems playfully attack the values and cultural practices of the upper educated class. She seems to get particular pleasure in speaking to a class she considers her own. McGinley assuredly viewed herself as a professional poet and somewhat of a literary critic. Several of her poems parody academic values, but perhaps none so much as “On the Prevalence of Literary Writers” where she laughs off the fluidity and indecisiveness of critical attention and lingo while also accentuating her old-fashioned taste:

It’s hard
Keeping up with the avant-garde.
There was the time that Donne
Had a place in the sun.
His *lettres* were *belles* of pure gold
And they tolled and they tolled and they tolled,
Until critics in suitable haunts
Took up Kafka (Franz).

Then everyone wanted to herald
The genius of Scott Fitzgerald.
And after, among Prominent Names,
It was utterly Henry James. (1-12)

The poem reveals McGinley to be not as light or limited as typically perceived. Providing the literary aficionado with a bit of a snicker at herself, McGinley adjusts her content to fit the greater boundaries of the *NY*'s constituency, simultaneously crafting an intensely witty poem using her hilarious light verse to meld form and content. The speaker cannot “[keep] up with the avant-garde” as the movement continues to push boundaries, so she launches back into a survey of literary critical attention. John Donne takes his temporary “place in the sun,” quite befitting as his speaker in “The Sun Rising” questions why the Sun must “call on us?” In his well-known poem, Donne positions the sun as a busybody, similar to the princes whose honor and wealth is as “alchemy” or fake gold. McGinley masterfully plays on one of Donne’s metaphysical love poems, punning the *belles lettres* the critics repetitively “tolled” so much about. The critics then turned to “Kafka (Franz)” the poet stylistically unique for his use of a German sentence structure using the moments before the sentence ending to bring forth (revelations). Most vaguely remember his first name “(Franz).” Every critic then turns to fiction and begins to “herald” the Jazz Age Fitzgerald, and by the end of the stanza they are reduced to studying and creating “Prominent Names” led by the novelist James.

Yet this poem, while poking fun at critics and their fixations, does have a self-reflexive undertone for McGinley and her own isolated status as well as an insightful questioning of criticism in general. The speaker acknowledges the “change when critics forgather,” tentatively crediting these changes to chance, and predicts the next author in the spotlight will be Willa Cather. But the final stanza ends with an odd tone:

And I’m happy the great ones are thriving,
But what puzzles my head

Is the thought that they needed reviving.
I had never been told they were dead. (25-28)

After satirically cataloguing great authors in the beginning of the poem, this ending offers a resolution, but a resolution portrayed somewhat askance. McGinley's speaker was never "told" the writers were dead, punning on the idea that writers are never famous until they die while also pondering the notion that literary works only become focal points when critics (purposefully or not) begin to talk about them as masterpieces; art is not art until it is called art. McGinley very much viewed herself a professional poet, but she seemed to know she was most popular with her readers.

This poem, then, does more than satirize academic perceptions. It begins to question if the "great ones" who are "thriving" have only acquired their status because they have somehow been found. McGinley seems to subtly push the idea that the common everyday writers, the popular writers, may have something to offer that has just not yet been "revived" or yet discovered, an ironically fifties avant-garde idea. One cannot help but think of the second-wave feminist movement that sparked the recovery of many female writers and their works. Ironically, McGinley's old-fashioned taste and her sources of influence from canonized authors are what help keep her out of the canon herself.

Eliding Expectations: "A Landscape of Love"

Comparative to poems like "Scientific Explanation of a Monday," "Landscape of Love" (Feb. 1959) reveals McGinley's more serious and high intellectual style—what might be considered her more poetical style— permeating the popular magazine stereotype and offers the housewife confidence in her own role as wife. Using the guiding metaphor of landscape and colonized territory, she presents love as a personal struggle, best known only to hardworking colonists; colonists who have started a new land, founded their own grounds, and pioneered new

territory, much like McGinley herself. She seems to comment on the love and marriage articles physically surrounding her work in *LHJ*, critiquing idealist advice columns while underscoring columns like “Making Marriage Work” that portrayed love and marriage as an ongoing process. Such an earnest poem requires a closer look.

The speaker of the poem cautions readers in the first section to “not believe them, Do not believe what strangers” (McGinley, “Landscape” 1), have to say when they return from a “snug, sunny, April-sheltering day / (Along the coast and guarded from great dangers)” (3-4). The speaker begins her warning that “strangers” to love have nothing substantial to say, as they have been “guarded” from the realities not seen on an April day. The speaker labels people (women) as “ignorant” if they think love is a “lotus-island” (6) or “Capri” (7) instead of a “huge landscape, perilous and stern” (8). Love at this point in the poem is not the marketed bliss of the Brillo Soap Pads, far from the instant and long-lasting domestic bliss portrayed in the ads. Rather love is

More poplared than the nations to the north,
More bird-beguiled, stream-haunted. But the ground
Shakes underfoot. Incessant thunders sound,
Winds shake the trees, and tides run back and forth
And tempests winter there, and flood and frost
In which too many a voyager is lost. (9-14)

Quite distant from her previous comic verse, “Landscape of Love” conveys its message in a serious, mentoring tone. McGinley “window” is revealed in this poem, as she seeks to teach her audience how to read the rest of the magazine. The formal yet varied iambic pentameter reflects McGinley’s adamant concern that her co-readers be able to distinguish reality from the romantic images of advertisements and published articles. Love, marriage in particular, situates itself on shaking ground with “incessant thunders,” enduring times of both “flood and frost” (13)—not quite an episode from *Leave It To Beaver*.

McGinley's second section exposes love as cultivated and personal. Beyond the elegant dresses and family of four living in suburbia, the speaker describes love as the "country" (15) that the "colonist" (15) discovers, hill by hill:

None knows this country save the colonist,
His homestead planted. He alone has seen
The hidden groves unconquerably green,
The secret mountains steeping through the midst.
Each is his own discovery. (15-19)

Love, here, is available to anyone, but unique to each individual pioneer. The "homestead" must be "planted" for the "hidden groves" to be seen. The *LHJ* guiding articles prove useful perhaps, but no article or column can tailor each individual relationship. The ads most definitely cannot speak to each individual. The speaker says that "No chart / Has pointed him past chasm, bog, quicksand... / Only the steadfast compass of the heart" (19-20, 22). Such lines seem almost Wordsworthian in content and style. Yet the speaker ends with a cautioned commission for women to "Turn a deaf ear, then, on the traveler who, / Speaking a foreign tongue, has never stood / Upon love's hills or in a holy wood" (23-25). Relationships in this poem are the domain of the people within them. For reading housewives, the poem offers empowerment and agency. They alone know how to be a good housekeeper, wife and mother; they alone can see the "hidden groves" beyond the touristy advertisements. Close reading McGinley's poetry positions her as a poet writing both humor and metaphor, highlighting housewives themselves as able to discern the joy and frustration within their own active roles, claiming for housewives a new territory in which to create their own homesteads.

Eliding Expectations: "A Word to Hostess"

Nonetheless, excerpting McGinley's crafty intellectual satire from the *NY* is not to say she did not include poems in the magazine that can be viewed just as domestic, sometimes more so, than those she chose to publish in *LHJ*. Just has her more seriously erudite poems permeated the

traditional domestic *LHJ*, much of her work in the *NY* was geared specifically geared towards the housewife. In “A Word to Hostesses” McGinley provides key instructions on how to be a good hostess and emphasizes the skills it takes to succeed at this job. The experienced speaker relays how “Celebrities are lonely when / They congregate with lesser men” (1-2) because when “Wrenched from their coteries, they lack / Mirrors to send their image back” (7-8). Thus, there are parameters to throwing a good dinner party; men must have equally interesting guests to reflect their own high character or they will pout and become bored. Therefore, careful selection of guests proves a primary rule in succeeding as hostess. For seat men “next [to] a Name, and lo! / How they most instantly will glow” (13-14). But this masterminded guest list and preplanned table seating that will produce a successful party are not solely intended on behalf of the satisfied guests, but are more necessary to expose the hostess as a skilled and trained success. For a hostess who is not trained by the poem will have guests who do not “sparkle” (6) or “luster” (9) or “glow” (14), whereas one who pays attention to instructions even a little can “make him glitter” (28). Sparkles are the recognizable reward of the flawless and pristine housewife.

CHAPTER 4

WRITING THE MEAN: “THE DOLL HOUSE” AND “THE HONOR OF BEING A WOMAN”

Culminating McGinley’s complex portrayal of the housewife, “The Doll House” published in *The New Yorker* in 1954 was “one of McGinley’s best-known poems” giving “further insight” into “relationship[s] of mutability” (Wagner 24). Paralleling the mutable status of women in the fifties, McGinley creates a more “conversational” tone that uses a child’s plaything as a microcosm to an adult’s dream. The poem begins with a mother bringing an old doll house down from the attic, after sorting through forgotten family relics—a “badminton set,” “skis too good / to give away,” the “hamsters’ cages” (McGinley, “Doll House” 3, 6). The doll house made it through the years with her children, and now she brings “it down once more / To a bedroom, empty now, on the second floor” (8). Without the interruptions and attention of children, the mother begins to relive her own life. She self-reflexively sees not only the mutable relationship with her children, but her own changing relationship to life as she restores the doll house to its original prestige:

There was nothing much
That couldn’t be used again with a bit of repair.
It was all there,
Perfect and little and inviolate.
So, with the delicate touch
A jeweler learns, she mended the rocking chair,
Meticulously laundered
The gossamer parlor curtains, dusted the grate,
Glued the glazed turkey to the flowered plate,
And polished the Lilliput writing desk. (10-19).

Through a constructed domestic space, the mother restores perfect detail to the doll house. With the “delicate touch” of an artful master with her creation, the mother repeats those actions that belabored her life before, this time producing a flawless physical image of perfect and “inviolable” (13) domesticity. The doll house is controllable, manageable, and vulnerable beneath the hands of the artist.

The mother's first interaction with the doll house is intentional, with explicit attention to material appearance—she mends, she launders, she dusts, she glues, she polishes. All actions revolve around routine housewife chores. Nothing goes by the wayside, rather every object seems almost beyond perfect. The “glazed turkey” (18) adorns the “flowered plate” (19), while the “grate” needs “dust[ing]” (17) almost as if it were truly in use. McGinley's excellent, though more subtle, rhyme scheme links the “grate” and the “flowered plate,” emphasizing their relationship within the house. Associating two objects seemingly unrelated, a dirty grate compared to an ornate plate, allows the structure of the poem to underscore the mother's creation of detailed perfection. One object is just as important as the other in an unblemished house, for anything out of order violates the ideal image. The house is only truly “inviolate” (13) once the mother has performed her perfected duties as housekeeper. Yet, the mother is not contained inside the house held prisoner at her Lilliput writing desk; she is, indeed, the creator of her own ambition.

Yet she “squander[s]” (20) a day and a half, “[b]inding the carpets round with a ribbon border” (22) until the house is “decorous and in order” (26). Nothing comes before the mother's creation of complete order; real life is sacrificed to “playing house.” Only after she places “the kettle upon the stove” (24), has “the mirror's face / Scoured” (24-25), and “the formal sofa set in its place” (25), can she rejoice with “grave delight” (23) that “It was a good house” (25). This last line literally starts a new stanza, just as it starts a new moment in the mother's life. No detail is left unattended and the house, perhaps like the mother as well, is not “good” until everything is permanently and exactly in place:

Here was her private estate, a peculiar treasure,
Cut to her fancy's measure.
Now there was none to trespass, no one to mock
The extravagance of her sewing or her spending

(The tablecloth stitched out of lace, the grandfather's clock,
Stately upon the landing,
With its hands eternally pointing to ten past five).

Now all would thrive (54-61).

The doll house has become a microcosm of complete and interference-free domestic control. Though in physical existence, the doll house is only a phantasmal construction of the mother's desire. She can have a lace tablecloth and a grandfather clock, items not always affordable in concrete existence; items laughed at by the prudent mom, scorned by the child-focus mother, and longed for by the speaker. She is contained not in the house, but outside of it. For only "[t]hrough the panes" (67) was she able to "peer at her world reduced to the size of a dream" (68).

Thus, like her dream, she is reduced to only touching her idealized domesticity.

And caught into this web of quietness
Where there was neither After or Before,
She reached her hand to stroke the unwithering grasses
Beside the small and incorruptible door (83-86).

The house, an archetypal symbol of domesticity, has achieved immortality, and the speaker is the "sole mistress" (67). The "doll house stands as a symbol of permanence in a world of shifting values and loves" (24), where the mother/housewife has become a deity. How tragic, then to "stroke the unwithering grasses" and know that the entire glorified identity is a charade. McGinley ends with the image of an "incorruptible door" in order to reemphasize the domestic construction as fake. The walls, the doors, the windows are all physically tangible yet artificial. McGinley offers a journey into make-believe through "The Doll House," but she constantly reminds the reader, and even the speaker of the poem, that perfection is only achieved through simulation.

“The Honor of Being a Woman” is a unique prose work to examine McGinley as writing the mean, lending more room to flesh out ideas only implied in short lines of poetry. In this *LHJ* essay published in 1959,⁷ (also published in a collected volume of essays, *The Province of the Heart*, 1959) McGinley weighs in on the public discussion of women. Taking in the advertised images of women, she presents a public opinion of her own. She opens the essay with a real life anecdote, enticing her readers through the classic humor of husband-and-wife banter in which her husband tried to pay her a compliment. She writes about the dialogue with her husband:

“You know, dear,” he remarked fondly, “you’re a wonderful girl. You think like a man.”

I can remember refuting him passionately. “But I don’t! I don’t. What a horrid thing to say!” (McGinley 13)

This first comedic dialogue disarms the reader with humorous domesticity and predicates McGinley’s first premise that women are a different “race” than men, a race that does “not want to think like men or feel like men or act like men—only like women and human beings” (13). She sees women as “suddenly enfranchised, hastily given the keys of all cities and all liberties” like “one of the new states created after a war” (13). McGinley views critics like Friedan and her followers as similar to an unrestricted kid in a candy store. In the midst of such criticism, McGinley cites women as “bemoaned and praised” in public discussion, “deafened by the noise of controversy” (14). Again the binary appears. McGinley’s “women” refer mainly to those housewives “bemoaned” by feminists and “praised” by the rest of the country. Observing this conundrum around her, confronted with the deafening ads and the noisy critics herself, McGinley recognized women caught in the either/or side of the publicly vocalized controversy.

⁷ Although published in *LHJ*, the version of this essay used here will be cited from McGinley’s later published book of essays, *The Province of the Heart* in order to use a more condensed text with accurate page numbers.

Agreeing with Friedan, McGinley felt women should be educated about their lot in life. “The Honor of Being a Woman,” then, is an essay intended primarily to encourage “girls” to “be realistic about their chances” (18) in the world at large. Unlike Friedan, she offers women a middle-of-the-road approach to this great discussion that is going on around them. McGinley valued femininity; she valued the unique powerful position and the unrivaled ability to cultivate relationships of a mother and a wife, and conservatively defended women’s right to enjoy those traditional roles. For her, women’s exceptional ability to foster familial and intimate relationships is the quality that segregates women into a different race, gives them their individuality and gives them their power. Because women had chosen to go to the “marketplace” she honored them as “alarmingly adaptable” (18), but the “price of success” often became “a grinding, gouging, knock-about struggle in which the essential feminine quality is lost (this even in light of McGinley’s own marketed career). And in the end it is only the truly gifted or the very dedicated who win through to the top” (18). Realistically, these comments are quite logical. McGinley does not debunk women who have followed their careers, she herself is one, but she poses the possibility that a secretarial office job may be just as boring as being a housewife. Similarly routine and contained, secretarial jobs (one of the most popular and accepted jobs for women) relocated housewifery duties outside the house. As “The Scientific Explanation of a Monday” highlights, housewives were functioning secretaries for their own households.

Yet while she lays claim to the honor of being a woman at home, McGinley seems alarmed at the growing numbers of young marriages and divorces across the country. Though her issue with divorce generates from her Catholic background, she faults society for pushing women into a “vocation for which almost nothing has prepared them” before “the ink [is] scarcely dry on their [high school] diplomas” (18). Here is one fault in education; it does not prepare women for

the work and skill involved in being a housewife. Remembering “A Word to Hostesses,” McGinley’s poetry comically attempts to fill those gaps. But there is also a fault in perception. Young women view the ads, and see ideal marriages and love told from “tourists” as McGinley elucidates in “Landscape of Love,” just like women who would eventually read *The Feminine Mystique*, and see the unending opportunity to follow their careers. Neither option was fully plausible. McGinley found the possibility of becoming both a housewife and a woman pursuing her career, but more so, she dictated the honor of being a woman.

As portrayed in advertisements, marriage looked easy, wifhood looked instinctual, and love seemed everlasting. McGinley espouses, “They [women] should have been told long ago that life is seldom fair, and that woman’s chief honor is to know that and be able to surmount it” (19). This social idea is perhaps similar to knowing the boundaries of poetic form and being able to manipulate it. McGinley found the pride in being a woman, the respect in being a wife, and the gift of being a mother. Unlike the ads, she is not claiming any of the above roles of housewives to be perfect and pristine, but she advocates the esteem found in enacting those roles well. Returning to the idea of McGinley as “housewife poet,” perhaps writing verse within contained forms is analogous to the performance of housewives. Figuring out the puzzle of end rhymes might be comparable to deducing the perfect seating arrangements for a dinner party. Business women held no more credit and skill than a housewife, for “business holds no rougher ordeals than does a housekeeping existence” (19). Housewifery was hard work. It could be dreary at times, McGinley does not dodge the reality of routine and drudgery. But more so, housewifery was physical, mental, emotional, and professional work.

To reemphasize housewives’ work and skill, she goes back to her humor and includes a laughable story of a saint entering a monastic life who had once been married with a child. This

saint comments, “‘Nothing,’ she exclaimed candidly, ‘in the rigors of a convent community can equal, for difficulty, the day-by-day exasperations of household living’” (20). The story is comic, but McGinley, again, makes her point very seriously within the layers of humor. Like Friedan, McGinley sees the “problem that has no name” as an issue characterizing housewives in the fifties, but rather than find a career to complete their identity, McGinley suggests they adjust perception and education.

In an effort to combat both the ads and second-wave feminism, McGinley published “The Honor of Being a Woman” with a sense of urgency. She passionately felt the need for upcoming women to understand what they were marrying into. She desired for women to both know their possibilities in life and also recognize their limitations. McGinley exalted the decision to be a housewife not as entering into a lifetime of unhappiness, but as gaining the respect and honor of having a domestic occupation. She ends her essay with an urgent plea to women around the nation:

Our greatest victories have always been moral ones. Without relinquishing our new learning or our immediate opportunities, we must return to a more native sphere. Let us teach our daughters not self-realization at any cost but the true glory of being a woman—sacrifice, containment, pride, and pleasure in our natural accomplishments. Let us win back honor. The honors will take care of themselves. (22)

For McGinley, women needed to embrace their skills as housewives without letting go of the progress women had made. Such an action was imperative to educate “daughters” who would soon question whether to embrace domestic ideals or pursue their own career. McGinley broke through the ads, and broke through the criticism to allow women to be both housewives and occupational women, hoping these women, regardless of their choice would recognize and acknowledge their honorable position in life.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

In the scheme of McGinley's poetry, nothing seems more prevalent than her undying tribute to housewives and their feminine capabilities as at least theoretically equivalent to professional work. Excerpting one of McGinley's essays, provides an example of what seems at first to be a random, laughable portrayal of women, but further illustrates women's "common sense and self-reliance." For "woman, as McGinley identifies her, is also a realist; she is perceptive to the worlds around her and to the relationships within them (Wagner 23). McGinley writes about women:

I like them for their all-around, all-weather dependability. I like them because they are generally so steady, realistic, and careful about tidying up after a hot shower. I admire them for their prudence, thrift, gallantry, common sense, and knobless knees, and because they are neither so vain nor so given to emotion as their opposite numbers. I like the way they answer letters promptly, put shoe trees in their shoes at night, and are so durable physically. Their natures may not be so fine or their hearts so readily touched as man's, but they are not so easily imposed on either. (23)

McGinley viewed women as intensely practical and virtuous; they were not advertisement models and they, quite honestly, could not have all become professional working women, nor did they all want to. McGinley positions Friedan as actually similar to the ads that Friedan so vocally opposed. Forcing women to feel guilty about not being a career-striver was very definitely linked to forcing women to feel ashamed of their inabilities as domestic models. Thus, McGinley boasted of being a "housewife poet" as the encompassing figure of a dual role for women in the fifties, breaking down the categorized binary. Women, realists, could read both *LHJ* and the *NY*, they could have a career or stay at home. McGinley herself could publish in a popular or academic magazine, she could be a housewife or win a Pulitzer. The categories were never completely separate. One side of the given binaries always permeated the other.

Though McGinley was, indeed, a conservative critic and writer, and she very much played toward a white middle and upper class audience, she forces us to reconsider the categories of domesticity. Using light verse as a means to captivate a wide popular and intellectual audience, she offered women humor instead of boredom or dissatisfaction. Forgotten by the academy, McGinley deserves to reside beside her fellow women advocates like Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich. She was, too, writing for the everyday woman, writing to push out ideas of containment from society. She just offered compromise instead of complete rejection. She commented, “Compromise, if not the spice of life, is its solidity. It is what makes nations great and marriages happy” (McGinley, “Suburbia” 114). McGinley promoted moderation and finding contentment and discursive in the same lifestyle. Adhering to the conventions of both light verse and fifties decorum, McGinley deconstructed binaries that have come to label 1950s housewives.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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