

SECTION III:

THE MANY SIDES OF WOMAN

“a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart”: The Effects of Conduct Literature on Women’s Autonomy in Jane Austen’s *Pride & Prejudice*

Lauren Gallant

Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* was published in Regency England at a time when conduct literature was a popular form of instructional reading for women. Conduct literature could be delivered in a variety of forms and genres with the aim of educating women in ideal values and behaviours to become accomplished and gain a husband. The ideal woman of conduct literature was “chaste, modest, dutiful, and self-effacing” (Johnson and Keen 239), a set of standards “founded on masculine paradigms of propriety or perfection” (Bronk 50). Women were “invited to know [themselves] as in need of direction and restraint . . . an effective internalization of the forms of femininity and associated behaviors which, though they [were] presented as natural, must be learned” (Johnson and Keen 239). Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, where she famously disapproved of conduct literature and its goal to foster wifely and motherly duties, as “female education . . . [should be] a justifiable end in itself” (Johnson and Keen 242). There is much evidence within Austen’s texts that indicate she both read and agreed with *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* through her engagement of Wollstonecraft’s ideas on conduct literature and women’s education. Notably, Mary and Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* embody a tension between adherence to and divergence from the lessons of conduct literature, where Austen promotes reason and judgement based on self-governance rather than dependence on instruction, suggesting that dependence inhibits autonomy of thought while freedom from instruction strengthens it.

Pride and Prejudice directly references *Fordyce's Sermons*—a well-known collection of conduct sermons regarded infamously by Wollstonecraft when she states: “I should not allow girls to peruse them, unless I designed to hunt every spark of nature out of their composition, melting every human quality into female weakness and artificial grace. I say artificial, for true grace arises from some kind of independence of mind” (121). These sermons are introduced in *Pride and Prejudice* by Mr. Collins, who reads them aloud to his cousins. Like the men who made up the majority of conduct writers at the time, Mr. Collins sees himself “more fitted by education and habitual study to decide on what is right than a young lady” (Austen 74), and believes “there can be nothing so advantageous to [women] as instruction” (52). Thus, Mr. Collins comes to embody the group which views conduct literature as necessary for the guidance of women to become accomplished wives and mothers.

As Nancy Johnson and Paul Keen suggest, there can be an internalized “[s]uccess in achieving—or performing—this ideal of dignified modesty . . . a perverse pleasure to be derived from conformity in and of itself” (239). Mary Bennet can be interpreted as a woman who has internalized lessons of conduct literature and endorses these lessons as pieces of wisdom, described by Lola Manning as “a projection of the implicit values of her time” (111). When Mary is first introduced, she is described as “a young lady of deep reflection . . . and . . . great books” (Austen 6), and who “worked hard for knowledge and accomplishments” (19). She considers Mr. Collins, a character who greatly endorses conduct literature, with “abilities much higher than any others; there was a solidity in his reflections which often struck her” (95). Mary often enters the dialogue to introduce “new observations of thread-bare morality” (46), and prides herself on her impromptu reflections which appear as tired clichés all too often seen in instructional literature (Manning 110). However, when Mary is called by her father to respond with a lesson on “the forms of introduction,” she “wished to say something very sensible, but knew not how” (Austen 6). While Mary has much to say when she finds an opportunity to recite lessons she hears in conduct literature, she is unable to apply her own unique opinions to the events around her. Wollstonecraft speaks on this very subject when she explains how conduct literature “enslave[s] women by cramping their understandings and sharpening their senses” (29); Mary’s

inability to express her own thoughts without referencing the lessons of conduct literature reveals how, though she is well-read, she has developed a dependence on the opinions of others which cripples her mind from independent thought.

Mary's dependence on conduct literature not only limits her ability to make her own independent observations, but more concernedly inhibits her ability to form opinions which defy these lessons. Wollstonecraft details the consequences of relying too heavily on the lessons of others, as "there is no improving an understanding . . . nor can any being act wisely from imitation, because in every circumstance of life there is a kind of individuality, which requires an exertion of judgment to modify general rules" (237). Mary Bennet, like Wollstonecraft explains, does not use her judgement to modify her applications of lessons based on circumstance. When Lydia runs away with Mr. Wickham, Mary reflects:

Unhappy as the event must be for Lydia, we may draw from it this useful lesson; that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable—that one false step involves her endless ruin" . . . Elizabeth lifted up her eyes in amazement, but was too oppressed to make any reply. Mary, however, continued to console herself with such kind of moral extractions from the evil before them. (Austen 214)

This piece of instruction closely resembles James Fordyce's instructional sermons when he urges readers to "[r]emember how tender a thing a woman's reputation is, how hard to preserve, and when lost how impossible to recover" (27). Such recitation of the familiar piece of conduct literature in light of Lydia's elopement demonstrates Mary's inability to use her own judgement to discern the appropriateness of her comments. Mary appears apathetic to Lydia and alienated from her sister, Elizabeth, who is amazed at Mary's detached professions of women's conduct over the wellbeing of her sister. With this, Austen uses Mary to demonstrate Wollstonecraft's messages in her novel—how a dependence on conduct literature can inhibit a woman's ability to form her own opinions unique or against that guidance which is so strongly advertised to her. Mary's opinions are not her own, and her application of the values of conduct literature impair her reasoning, where her autonomy of thought itself becomes compromised.

Elizabeth, who is deeply amazed and uncomfortable with Mary's application of conduct literature in regards to Lydia, can be seen as an example of a woman

who, like Wollstonecraft, defies dependence on instruction and instead promotes an education which “extend[s] to women the Enlightenment principles of basing both knowledge and morality upon reason . . . [which provides] freedom . . . to judge and think for themselves” (Habib 345). In comparison to Mary Bennet, Elizabeth considers Mr. Collins to be a “conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly man,” and further, “the woman who marries him, cannot have a proper way of thinking” (Austen 103). When Elizabeth refuses Mr. Collins’ proposal of marriage, she urges him to take her refusal seriously, saying, “give me leave to judge for myself . . . [d]o not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart” (82-83). This declaration emphasizes Elizabeth’s own judgement, made based on the “truth from her heart” rather than on the instruction of others. Further, Elizabeth’s identification “as a rational creature” rather than “an elegant female” reflects language used by Wollstonecraft, who writes:

My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their fascinating graces . . . and to convince them, that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness. (11)

Elizabeth asserts her autonomy through an independence of thought, choosing to refuse Mr. Collins based on her own judgement rather than upon the reflections of the advice of conduct literature. Indeed, Elizabeth denies the lessons which would instruct in such a situation as a proposal, as the “ultimate goal according to the conduct book narrative is, of course, to secure an advantageous marriage, and with it social and financial security, in a highly competitive market” (Johnson and Keen 239-240). Instead, Elizabeth disregards external instruction and follows her own moral compass, freeing herself from the confines of the opinions of others and the goal of marriage, thus asserting her autonomy.

Mary Bennet’s dedication to conduct literature is in “the pursuit of accomplishments” (Austen 288), and it is these accomplishments which nominate particular women as superior specimens of womanhood. Such a depiction is demonstrated by James Fordyce, who describes the accomplished woman as “the image of celestial excellence . . . in whom purity and meekness, intelligence and modesty, mingle their charms” (91). This kind of idealization in conduct literature is prob-

lematic, as it advertises a favourable goal of womanhood which can only be achieved through dependence and careful adherence to the lessons of its writers. Further, the notion of the idealized woman encourages a divide between the sexes, where women appear as otherworldly creatures rather than fellow humans. Wollstonecraft disapproves of the image of the accomplished woman, as “in the education of women the cultivation of the understanding is always subordinate to the acquirement of some corporeal accomplishment” (30). In a conversation on what makes an accomplished woman with Miss Bingley, Elizabeth disregards her definition of the accomplished woman which proposes a strict set of skills when she boldly replies: “I never saw such a woman. I never saw such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance, as you describe, united” (Austen 30). Elizabeth’s claim deconstructs unattainable standards of accomplishment set in conduct literature, denying the image of women as “celestial” beings to instead be considered as *human* beings capable of education beyond that which promotes them as suitable wives and mothers.

Jane Austen effectively engages with Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in *Pride and Prejudice* by creating characters which embody Wollstonecraft’s depictions of women affected by the influence of conduct literature. Mary embodies the lessons of conduct literature and thus demonstrates a lack of autonomy while Elizabeth possesses a strong sense of autonomy, diverging from dependence on others’ opinions toward self-governance. While Wollstonecraft asserts that the object of education should not just be to gain a husband, she remarks on the improvement of women as partners to men in marriage through the strengthening of reasoning and judgement, as “beauty, gentleness, etc. etc. may gain a heart; but esteem, the only lasting affection, can alone be obtained by virtue supported by reason” (125). Interestingly, it is Elizabeth who marries Mr. Darcy, the most eligible bachelor in the novel and objectively ideal aspiration of a so-called accomplished woman. Austen thus suggests that an endeavour to excellence through adherence to conduct literature is futile if a woman wishes to achieve love and happiness as well as just marriage; autonomy of thought fostered through an independent mind will alone permit true partnership based on equality of intellect, and will therefore rise above any mere feminine accomplishment a woman can achieve.

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“Elegant” Versus “Vulgar” Fashion: How a Simple TikTok Video Promotes a Patriarchal Hierarchy Amongst Women

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Amira Bessette is a digital content creator and finishing school graduate whose content centres around “elegant” fashion styling tips for women and girls. Bessette’s content is not unique on TikTok, but for this essay she will be used as an example due to the persona she has built on this platform surrounding this curated idea of elegance. Sprinkled throughout Bessette’s fashion styling advice on her TikTok page is the content that I will be focusing on in this essay: This type of video contains Bessette, looking elegantly at the camera, pointing to different images that pop up on the screen and informing the viewer of whether they are “elegant” or “vulgar”. The images being compared are variations of the same thing, such as two different shades of red nail polish, two different amounts of filler in one’s lips, wine as opposed to beer, or a modest versus revealing outfit, to name a few. With 897.8k followers at the time of writing this essay, Bessette’s content is agreeable to many people who resonate with her outlook on female fashion and lifestyle. The issue that I raise is in the assumption that all the opinions on female presentation stated by Bessette are just that, *opinions*. By writing off the differentiation between elegance and vulgarity displayed in videos like Bessette’s as merely opinion, one can ignore the patriarchal influence present and deny the impact of this rhetoric on the preservation of patriarchal standards. By dividing the oppressed group over trivial matters such as which shade of red they paint their nails, the patriarchy succeeds in evading accountability for the discourse surrounding ascribed respectability based on looks. In other words, it benefits the patriarchy for women to see each other as the enemy rather than being united against the enemy that is the patriarchy. Thus, although women are free to present themselves how they choose to, the negative connotation these videos place upon the forms of womanhood they deem as *vulgar* creates a hierarchy of womanhood that is counterproductive to the progression of women’s liberation as a whole.

The impact of Bessette’s video is largely attributed to the platform on which it stands. Thus, before I begin to dissect the implications of Bessette’s video, I would

like to first paint a picture of the digital world that the video exists within. TikTok is a social media platform that was released in 2016 by the Chinese technology company ByteDance. The format of the platform functions as an endless stream of short form content, where videos can range anywhere from ten seconds to ten minutes long. TikTok is unique in that, unlike a platform such as Instagram, its so-called 'home page' is a feed of suggested content chosen for users by the algorithm. The result of this is a constant stimulation of the mind, which eventually becomes desensitized to the content it scrolls through. With videos like Bessette's, this desensitization is dangerous due to the passivity with which users consume the app's content. On the surface, Bessette's video could be seen as a style guide for women who desire *elegant* clothing and beauty trends. The under-current of misogyny that can be deciphered through a feminist critical lens is overlooked entirely in the absence of critical thinking. Because many users view social media as an escape from critical thinking, the underlying rhetoric of videos like Bessette's succeeds in covertly relaying a message to the user that is a result of patriarchal ideology that neither the audience nor the creator is consciously enforcing. Bessette's content is not advertised as reinforcing patriarchal standards; in fact, her content does not centre men's perceptions of women at all. Her content is rather an unconscious reinforcement of patriarchy through the language it uses to value one way of feminine presentation over another. I argue that the passivity of this content is its danger, because if both the creator and the audience are writing off this content as ideal style inspiration and nothing more, the rhetoric begins to completely discount the women whose stylistic expression differs from said ideal.

The practice of feminist criticism focuses "on the rhetorical forms and processes through which oppression is maintained and transformed" (Foss 168). To analyze Bessette's video through a feminist critical lens, one must investigate how the video constructs an ideal version of gender presentation for women, and how this construction attributes a certain level of respectability to women depending on the degree to which they conform to the ideal. I will do this through examining the only two words Bessette uses to convey her message in the video, *elegant* and *vulgar*. The choice of these two words in particular is significant, as while the word *elegant* alone could very well be categorized as a style of dressing and presenting

oneself, it is its position as the antithesis of *vulgar* where the problem lies. Juxtaposing these two words together is effective because Bessette and her audience have a shared understanding that *elegant* has a more ideal connotation than *vulgar*. With this understanding, Bessette spends the duration of the video categorizing different aspects of feminine expression as one of the two. Her specific focus on feminine expression is highlighted in her categorization of nail polish colours, makeup styles, and wedding dress styles, for example. By painting one form of expression as *ideal* and the other as *less than*, Bessette's video constructs a hierarchal divide among women based on their stylistic preferences. This hierarchal divide spans further than one's outward presentation, as the context of Bessette's video insinuates that *elegant* is synonymous with "more worthy of respect", and *vulgar* is synonymous with "trashy" or "discountable". With the context of these synonymous words in mind, it can be seen how Bessette's seemingly harmless fashion advice carries messages of patriarchal value ascribed to women based on the way they dress. Bessette herself is not entirely to blame for this rhetoric, as her internalization of these values likely stems from her own observation of this messaging, whether covertly or overtly. As a woman taking part in perpetuating this harmful patriarchal hierarchy, Bessette is an example of how this hierarchal rhetoric is ingrained into the lives of women whether they are conscious of it or not.

Bessette's position as a woman who places herself in the more desirable, "elegant" category is significant in understanding the rhetoric displayed in her video. Because Bessette's video does not directly mention the male gaze, viewers may overlook the possibility that its messaging promotes patriarchal standards of respectability. I argue that it is precisely the presentation of this rhetoric through a female content creator that feeds these patriarchal structures. It is easier to detect patriarchal bias when the rhetoric comes from men; one may not suspect that a member of an oppressed group would perpetuate rhetoric that furthers their own oppression. The work of the patriarchy is not always overt; it can be sneaky, quiet, and unassuming. The patriarchy conditions women from the moment that they first interact with any form of media to believe that there is a way to absolve themselves of oppressive judgement by fitting into a patriarchal ideal. By positioning two versions of female presentation against each other, Bessette's content perpetuates a hierarchy that is counterproductive to liberating women from the confines of patriarchal standards. There is an evident disconnect from the root of

female oppression that can be seen in the stance of content creators like Bessette who promote this hierarchy under the guise of opinion-based fashion advice. Being informed of and connected to the root cause of women's oppression requires an understanding that constructing hierarchy amongst women does not increase their value in a patriarchal system, as the patriarchy steadily benefits from women making each other the enemy instead of being united against the common enemy.

The trend of content like Bessette's on short-form social media content apps such as TikTok promotes a passive disconnect from the patriarchal structure that has set up the conditions for the discourse surrounding the standards for how women present themselves. Disguised simply as fashion preferences and opinion-based advice, this style of content covertly contains an underlying bias towards the modest presentation of womanhood that the patriarchy associates with respectability. When this rhetoric comes from a female creator such as Bessette, it makes the underlying bias more difficult to detect and therefore more easily integrated into the lives of the women who consume this content without them consciously realizing it. The impact of Bessette's gender identity on how her opinions are received, coupled with the general passivity associated with scrolling through videos on TikTok, cultivates an environment in which the audience may not feel it is necessary to employ critical thinking, which makes them more vulnerable to internalizing the underlying patriarchal bias.

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Between Feminist Extremes: Phyllis McGinley's Poetic Endorsement of Domestic Agency

Skylar Blanchard

Feminism, as I define it, is the advocacy for gender equality; a feminist is an individual who advocates for feminism, critiquing societal expectations that constrain women's agency. Although Phyllis McGinley identified as "an anti-feminist" in the mid-twentieth century, her poem "View from a Suburban Window" portrays housewifery as "a profession" rather than a maternal duty, acknowledging women's agency within the domestic sphere by depicting domestic labour as a choice that holds equal value to paid occupations (Gill, "Quite" 427).¹ However, McGinley's recognition of women's agency within the domestic sphere situates her within a conservative feminist framework due to the influx of radical feminists in the mid-twentieth century, who sought to separate women from the household, perceiving an inherent connection between domestic labour and patriarchal gender oppression (Leroy 134). Since my view on feminism aligns with McGinley's endorsement of housewifery, this essay adopts "conservative feminism/feminist(s)" to represent my definition above. In contrast, the use of "radical feminism/feminist(s)" presents an advocacy for gender equality that excludes housewifery. By exploring the tension between societal constraints and female agency, McGinley critiques the undervaluation of domestic labour and highlights the challenges of aligning with conservative feminism.

EXPLORATIONS BEYOND ANTI-FEMINISM

From the mid-to-late twentieth century, the second-wave feminist movement aimed to dismantle societal structures that confined women to domestic roles and, as the movement challenged "persistent anti-feminist rhetoric," address the denial of female opportunities for personal and professional growth (Gill, "Quite" 423). Betty Friedan's "The Feminine Mystique" (1963) was presented as "[foundational] to second-wave feminist movements" for upholding extreme interpretations adopted into radical feminist frameworks (Gill, "Phyllis" 366). In this book, Friedan

¹ In this essay, "domestic labour" refers to the unpaid labour of a housewife.

emphasized “the misery of the frustrated housewife” trapped in a “Comfortable Concentration Camp” (Shteir 90). Although Freidan’s analogy was empowering to women who correlated housewifery to patriarchal gender expectations, the portrayal of housewives as “mindless victims” was inherently dehumanizing to women who, like McGinley, valued and enjoyed domestic labour (Shteir 90). As a result, McGinley’s rejection of the positioning of domestic labour as oppressive—claiming Freidan’s correlation to be “nonsense”—situated her in opposition to the “dominant constituency” that decided radical feminism would represent the second-wave feminist movement (Gill, “Phyllis” 366; Cobble 147). McGinley’s stance emphasizes the overlooked dimension of mid-twentieth-century feminist debates, which often disregarded the existence of women who found genuine intellectual, emotional, and moral fulfillment in domestic roles, thereby challenging the uniformity implied by radical feminist ideas.

Unlike the biased opposition of radical feminists, McGinley’s defence of housewifery in her poem “View from a Suburban Window” depicts conservative feminist values by impartially exploring the benefits and complexities of domestic labour and paid occupations. McGinley’s speaker, a housewife, appears as a versatile figure capable of “Papering shelves... saving for the rent / ...[and] prodding grape-fruit” while “persuading to the dentist / The wailing young, ...[and] fitting them for shoes” (3-6). Through the speaker’s reflection on mundane yet intricate tasks, McGinley portrays the hardships of domestic labour and recognizes women’s achievements in managing such complex responsibilities, critiquing radical feminist depictions of female passivity by positioning housewives as positively contributing to society. Afterwards, the speaker imagines, “I might in some tall town instead / ...be furthering a Career / ...in my single flat, / My life my own” (9-12). McGinley presents women in paid occupations as benefitting from independence, but, as the speaker reflects on her desire for domestic security, complicates the benefit by emphasizing its dependence on a lack of family relations. The speaker’s validation of domestic labour and paid occupation affirms women’s agency through their ability to navigate a radically feminist society regardless of professional limitations. In the closing line, the speaker reflects that she “might have done much worse,” acknowledging how radical feminist frameworks marginalize her position as a satisfied housewife (14). By concluding the poem with a statement that elevates the domestic sphere as a

legitimate site of meaning, skill, and value, McGinley embraces conservative feminist ideas of female agency and equality. Thus, McGinley's claim to be an anti-feminist only depicts her advocacy for re-evaluating mid-twentieth-century societal associations with radical feminism, critiquing the status quo and what constitutes radical feminist resistance.

ADAPTING RADICAL FEMINIST IDEAS

By situating the speaker as "apprenticed / Forever to a grinning household muse," McGinley satirizes radical feminist ideas regarding the relentless nature of domestic labour and its dominance over the speaker's existence (7-8). McGinley's emphasis on an eternal domestic apprenticeship adds a layer of irony that suggests the speaker's smile is an insincere masking of the personal sacrifices patriarchal gender expectations require when subjecting women to domestic labour. This masking aligns with Friedan's critique "of the post-war [suburban ideal]," which created a "problem that has no name" by concealing the widespread dissatisfaction of women constrained to domestic labour (Gill, "Quite" 423; Shteir 88). However, McGinley's satirical tone offers a perspective that uses the challenges of housewifery to explore its intrinsic value. By weaving critique and affirmation to provide a conservative feminist perspective, McGinley emphasizes the essentiality of resisting the simplistic categorizations that dismiss housewives as victims (like radical feminists) or valorize a patriarchally oppressive suburban ideal (like anti-feminists). Her approach thus destabilizes rigid ideologies, fostering a more nuanced understanding of how women navigate, resist, and potentially thrive within domesticity.

The speaker's reflection on alternative possibilities—"From nine to five be furthering a Career"—reveals the tension between personal freedom and societal expectations (McGinley 10). By imagining herself in a paid occupation, the speaker evokes "a sense of [agency and] self-worth," being liberated from radical feminist ideas of repetitive and consuming domestic labour (Gill, "Quite" 428). The radical feminist exploration implies that domestic labour is inherently oppressive due to the housewives' inaccessibility to independence and opportunities, as they must sacrifice their freedom. However, McGinley tempers this critique with a sense of acceptance—the speaker concedes that she "might have done much worse" in a paid occupation—to emphasize the necessity of recognizing domestic contributions as valuable, even though such recognition destabilizes the ideals of radical feminism

(14). By redefining radical feminist ideas of the dissatisfied housewife to associate the emotion with a lack of external support, McGinley critiques societal structures—including radical feminism—that disparage “sex-based labor” (Cobble 147). In essence, McGinley reclaims the narrative surrounding domesticity, positing that dissatisfaction arises not from the nature of domestic labour but from the absence of broader cultural recognition, economic support, and conservative feminist discourse.

McGinley’s portrayal of domestic labour challenges the binary opposition between domesticity and liberation found in radical feminist critiques. By reframing housewifery as a valuable profession, McGinley depicts “housewives... [as] multitasking, powerful individuals; they are managers, multitaskers, intellectuals, corporate decision-makers... [and] mothers” (Leroy 143). The speaker emphasizes the values and skills required for domestic labour by suggesting that housewives must be financially sensible to “[save] for the rent” and attentive to detail when “prodding grapefruit” (McGinley 3-4). McGinley’s deconstruction of domestic labour, revealing the various demands that the speaker balances, critiques radical feminist ideas by reframing their view of “menial labor... [as] tasks requiring expertise on housewifery” (Shteir 88). By recognizing domestic labour’s economic and social aspects, which positions housewifery as an essential and skilled form of work rather than an unremarkable circumstantial occurrence, McGinley aligns herself with conservative feminist advocacy of “suburbia... as a valuable rather than a pitiable space” (Gill, “Quite” 432). In doing so, McGinley challenges radical feminist assumptions about what constitutes valuable labour, emphasizing that the domestic sphere is a realm of complexity, resourcefulness, and strategic thinking.

UNDERSTANDING MCGINLEY THROUGH HER CRITICS

Public responses to McGinley’s work, which presented humorous depictions of domesticity that resonated with housewives, reflected the cultural tensions surrounding gender roles in mid-twentieth-century America. Magazines like *The Ladies’ Home Journal* widely published her work, and—reaching millions of readers—established her reputation as the “Poet Laureate of Suburbia” (Gill, “Phyllis” 362-4). However, this popularity also contributed to her marginalization within literary and radical feminist circles as critics dismissed her light verse as insignificant and apolitical (359). These dismissals highlight the pervasive gender biases in literary

criticisms from the mid-twentieth century, where works centring on domestic themes—often written by women—were undervalued compared to more “serious” literature that explored traditionally male domains (365). The term “light verse,” frequently applied to McGinley’s work, functioned as a disparaging label that diminished cultural significance, even as her poetry adeptly balanced humour with sharp-witted social commentary (Leroy 140). This tension reveals how McGinley’s focus on domestic labour challenged and complicated prevailing literary hierarchies, as evident in mid-twentieth-century debates regarding what constituted valuable literature. By giving a voice to a demographic often excluded from high literature and neglected by radical feminism, McGinley affirmed the importance of housewives’ experiences despite their marginalization. McGinley’s treatment of housewifery thus becomes an act of cultural revision as she elevates domestic labour to a status that merits critical examination.

Radical feminists—like Friedan—particularly oppose McGinley’s focus on domestic labour, claiming that it “implicitly [denies] the vision, and the satisfying hard work involved in [her] poems, [by refusing to portray women through] the lives they lead, not as housewives, but as individuals” (Leroy 138). By oversimplifying McGinley’s portrayal of housewives, Friedan frames the domestic sphere as a site of identity erasure—a radical feminist idea that focuses on the complexities of the “feminine mystique”—to dismiss domestic labour as inherently limiting (Shteir 89). Sylvia Plath expresses similar frustration with McGinley’s idealization of housewifery, which she perceives as dismissing the struggles that many women face within the domestic sphere, notably the requirement of emotional and intellectual sacrifices (Leroy 139). However, these critics often overlook McGinley’s impartial engagement with domesticity’s dualities and her exposure of its challenges through humour. Contemporary scholars have begun to reassess McGinley’s work, arguing that she disrupts radical feminist ideas—binary frame-works that situate domestic labour against liberation—by asserting the need for a “revalidation of feminine life within [domesticity]” (Gill, “Quite” 432). Through her recognition of housewifery as a profession, McGinley’s work aligns with conservative feminism by exploring female agency within the domestic sphere; this reassessment emphasizes the longevity of McGinley’s contribution, as her poetry prompts ongoing dialogue about the complexities of housewives’ roles that neither radical nor conservative

feminism can fully encapsulate without acknowledging the value of domestic agency.

McGinley's humour further complicates her reception by employing a light tone, as it "disarms a skeptical audience... to gain more neutral reception and to relieve the expectation of idealized domesticity" (Leroy 134). As seen through her depiction of the speaker at the "grocers," McGinley combines light-hearted humour and sharp social commentary to critique radical feminist ideas—namely, that housewives are passive and unskilled—without alienating her audience (4). Using humour, McGinley presents housewives as skilled and critiques the societal structures that invalidate their agency and experiences. Her humour, therefore, was not merely a stylistic choice but a deliberate strategy to bridge cultural divides, inviting patriarchal and radical feminist audiences to reconsider the value of domestic life.

FEMINIST RECLAMATION AND MILTONIC ECHOES

Phyllis McGinley's "View from a Suburban Window" complicates traditional narratives of feminism and anti-feminism through her nuanced portrayal of housewifery, in which she critiques the undervaluation of domestic labour while validating the experiences of housewives. By presenting housewifery as demanding and meaningful, McGinley challenges the binary opposition that often characterizes radical feminist discourse, which tends to situate paid professions against domestic labour (Gill, "Quite" 424). Her work suggests that fulfillment does not confine itself to a single sphere but can emerge from any role that offers purpose and agency. This perspective confronts societal structures that perpetuate the devaluation of domestic labour precisely because it is a female-dominated field (Gill, "Phyllis" 365). By elevating the conversation around housewifery, McGinley validates the personal satisfaction it can offer and criticizes the lack of systemic recognition and support for those who choose it. McGinley's poem invites a re-evaluation of radical feminist discourse by validating and encouraging individuals to consider housewifery a legitimate, skilled profession rather than a default or secondary choice, acknowledging the plurality of women's experiences (Shteir 95). Her critique of radical feminism—which addresses the tension of second-wave feminism's emphasis on liberation through a rejection of domestic labour—is not a denial of the political legitimacy of radical feminist frameworks, but a call to ensure that

they include the realities of women who derive satisfaction from domestic life (Leroy 134). McGinley's portrayal challenges readers to expand their understanding of conservative feminism, including all forms of agency, whether expressed through paid professional achievement or unpaid domestic dedication. By framing domestic labour as a choice rather than an imposition, McGinley challenges readers to reconsider the value of housewifery and reclaim the domestic sphere as a site of agency and dignity. Through her engagement with conservative feminist ideas, McGinley demonstrates that agency and fulfillment can exist within the domestic sphere that radical feminists view as restrictive. Her poetry emphasizes that the determinant of value in any profession is one's personal ambition, serving as a reminder that true liberation lies in the ability to choose one's path without judgment or marginalization. Such an understanding resonates in contemporary debates about work-life balance, the revaluation of caregiving roles, and the ongoing feminist calls to legitimize all forms of labour contributing to societal well-being.

Through her intertextual engagement with John Milton's "Sonnet XIX: When I Consider How My Light Is Spent," McGinley extends the significance of her poem beyond its mid-twentieth-century context, weaving together religious, historical, and feminist discourses to interrogate traditional measures of worth and purpose. As Milton's speaker ponders the spiritual value of service under physical limitations—"They also serve who only stand and wait"—McGinley adapts this reflection into a gendered critique of domesticity (Milton 14). McGinley's adaptation of Milton's opening line, "When I consider how my light is spent," substitutes the religious and moral weight of his speaker's dilemma into her speaker's discourse regarding the domestic sphere, where a housewife's "light" represents her energy, talents, and intellectual capacity (Milton 1; McGinley 1). Unlike Milton's speaker, who achieves resolution through accepting spiritual patience, McGinley's speaker envisions alternative possibilities and reclaims domestic labour as a meaningful, skilled profession rather than an imposed duty. By blending Milton's theological inquiry with a critique of radical feminist binaries, McGinley's poem challenges the assumption that fulfillment exists solely in publicly recognized achievements or liberated professional roles; instead, it posits that agency, moral significance, and personal satisfaction can flourish within the domestic sphere. In doing so, McGinley reframes housewifery as neither an unquestioned virtue nor a passive surrender, but a conscious, morally-substantive choice that necessitates endless

respect. This reimagining not only bridges Early Modern spiritual anxieties with mid-twentieth-century feminist debates but also provides a framework for contemporary readers to reassess the hierarchical values placed upon different forms of work, ultimately enlarging their understanding of human purpose to include the often-overlooked, quiet labours that sustain families and communities. Thus, McGinley's interconnection with Milton expands her poem's impact beyond the political debates of the mid-twentieth century, inviting readers to reconsider what counts as meaningful work and acknowledge that true liberation, like Milton's service and McGinley's domestic labour, resides in purposeful engagement — whether spiritual or domestic, public or private.

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