

“Phyllis McGinley needs no puff”: Gender and Value in Mid-Century American Poetry

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ABSTRACT: This essay takes the work of the “housewife poet,” Phyllis McGinley (1905-1978), as the starting point for a critical examination of the complex relationship between American women poets, masculine literary culture, and the second-wave feminist movement in the middle decades of the twentieth century. It posits a number of factors behind McGinley’s rise to fame as a poet and subsequent decline in reputation, and it establishes hitherto overlooked—and productive—relationships between her writing and that of her better-known successors, including Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Elizabeth Bishop. The essay draws on a range of unpublished archival resources in offering a reading of McGinley’s work in relation to its poetic, spatial, and historical contexts. Specifically, it addresses her choice of “light verse” and appeal to a popular market, her suburban origins and themes, and her opposition to the emergent feminist movement. By deploying McGinley’s life and work as an exemplar, this essay proposes a re-evaluation of the complex discourses of gender, location, and literary value in mid-century American culture.

The American “housewife poet” Phyllis McGinley—best-selling author, Pulitzer prize-winner, acclaimed “Poet Laureate of Suburbia,” and self-declared enemy of feminism—has, in the decades since her mid-century heyday, disappeared almost entirely from public and critical notice.¹ She was one of the best-known and most widely read poets of her generation. Her 1954 collection *The Love Letters of Phyllis McGinley* sold some 150,000 copies, her selected poems, *Times Three: Selected Verse from Three Decades* (1960), sold 60,000 copies in hardback alone, and her prose excoriation of the feminist movement, *Sixpence in her Shoe* (1964), spent over six months on the *New York Times* bestseller list.²

With the exception of Linda Wagner’s early and brief study of McGinley in the Twayne United States Authors series, her work has appeared only as an aside, for example, in Robert Beuka’s *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (2004), in Stephen Burt’s *The Forms of Youth: Twentieth-Century Poetry and Adolescence* (2013), in Nancy Walker’s work on women’s humour in American culture, and in my study of McGinley’s successor, Anne Sexton.³ Her poetry goes unnoticed in Norton and Heath anthologies of American literature and poetry, replicating an omission that, as we will see shortly, began with the editorial

policies of influential mid-century anthologists such as Louis Untermeyer and John Ciardi. She is uncited in Jay Parini and Brett C. Millier's otherwise exhaustive *The Columbia History of American Poetry: From the Puritans to Our Time* (1993), and her correspondence with critics and poets such as Ciardi, Sexton, and Marianne Moore remains uncollected in editions of their letters.⁴ Equally puzzlingly, there is no mention of McGinley in the extensive records of the second-wave feminist movement, the rise of which she so publicly and persistently resisted. Nor does she appear in the many anthologies of women's poetry that emerged in feminism's wake to restore and preserve many other women poets' work.

This essay examines the production and reception of McGinley's poetry with a view to explicating the complicated relationship between women poets, a masculine literary culture, and the second-wave feminist movement. It posits a number of factors behind McGinley's rise and fall while establishing hitherto overlooked—and productive—relationships between her writing and that of her better-known successors including Sylvia Plath, Sexton, and Elizabeth Bishop. In the case of McGinley, there are several plausible reasons for the decline in her critical standing, such as her choice of genre (light verse) in a period dominated, in turn, by modernist, political, and confessional poetics; economic factors that both motivated her writing and shaped its market; her relationship—as proud defender of the suburbs—with a metropolitan literary elite; and her gender. In terms of the last reason, her marginalization by male coteries and her problematic relationship with an ascendant feminist movement whose success threatened both her credo and her audience have both played a part.⁵ With McGinley's life and work as an exemplar, this essay proposes a re-evaluation of the complex discourses of gender and literary value in mid-century America.

I. Early Career

McGinley was born in Oregon in 1905, a “pure third-generation immigrant—German on one side and Irish on the other” as she explains in a 1961 biographical essay.⁶ She was raised in Colorado and Utah before moving to New York in the late 1920s to work as a teacher. She married in 1937 and moved to Larchmont, a privileged Westchester County suburb, where she brought up two daughters and continued her writing career, making a handsome living from poetry, children's books, and articles about family life, which she published in popular magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *Ladies' Home Journal*.⁷ She had a huge and celebrity readership. Fans included Kirk Douglas, who wrote to her in 1963, enclosing a self-addressed, stamped envelope and his copy of *The Love Letters of Phyllis McGinley* asking that she autograph it, and Groucho Marx, who conducted an enthusiastic decade-long correspondence.⁸ Robert Frost was reported to admire her work.⁹

She began writing poetry as a child and continued throughout her college and early teaching years. Her first documented acceptance came from the *Ladies' Home Journal* in December 1925 for a poem entitled "The Street of Little Houses." She was paid twenty-five dollars.¹⁰ In the same year, Harold Ross launched the *New Yorker* magazine. This was a propitious event for McGinley, who began publishing there in January 1932, receiving the offer of a first-reading agreement in 1937 and placing almost 300 poems in that magazine over the next three decades.¹¹ Ironically, though, the association was to prove one of the factors in McGinley's decline from scholarly notice. As Ben Yagoda has shown, the *New Yorker* had a checkered history as a poetry publisher with poetry editor Katharine White periodically battling Ross for the genre's continued inclusion.¹² The magazine became known for its light-hearted, pithy, arch style and for attracting what was regarded as a middle-brow, unadventurous readership. Its reputation lagged behind that of contemporaneous periodicals such as the more avant-garde *Poetry*, and even though in time it was to accept contributions from, amongst others, Langston Hughes, Theodore Roethke, Plath, and Bishop, it was typically looked down on by many of the literary elite. Yagoda reports, regarding the magazine's attempt to commission Wallace Stevens, "Stevens once advised Richard Wilbur that publishing in the *New Yorker* would be the worst thing he could do for his career as a poet" (p. 173).

The advice of White, McGinley's editor at the magazine, pushed her work in a direction that proved inimical to her long-term reputation. Her first poetry was thoughtful, lyrical, and stylistically accomplished even if, by her own account, overly influenced by two contemporary "greats." In an undated (probably late 1960s) draft of an article "Why We Teach," commissioned for a correspondence course run by the Famous Writers School, she explains: "This [the mid-1930s] was the high era of Dorothy Parker and Edna Millay, of the lovelorn poem with the sting in its tail. They served me as models."¹³ Valuable though these female influences might have proved to be, such a path was not to the *New Yorker's* liking. In a 1935 letter, White explains:

We don't say that personal poems are always bad for us, but we would like you to think about this tendency and to avoid it a little bit if you can because there has been much criticism of the school of lady poets who talk about their own woes, their own joys, and their own idiosyncrasies. Yours have always had till now a detachment that was refreshing and that set you apart from the average weebegone lady poet.¹⁴

McGinley later recalled: "I took the suggestion to heart and never wrote another poem in that vein. I turned to different subjects and a different tone, both satiric."¹⁵ At around the same time, her first publisher, Malcolm Johnson at Doubleday in New York, steered her away from the political verse that was her other interest, advising that for the purposes of her first

collection, “the more serious pieces . . . ought to be eliminated.”¹⁶ Her decision to accept such advice was arguably deleterious to her development as a poet and certainly damaging to her long-term standing. Her apparent willingness to bow to market pressures was not lost on her readers and critics. Plath, at one time an interested reader of her work, dismisses her as a possible model in a journal entry of March 1958: “Phyllis McGinley is out—light verse: she’s sold herself.”¹⁷

II. Light Verse

Plath’s rejection of McGinley’s example confirms and consolidates the schism between “light” and “serious” verse—and exponentially between popular and elite, feminine and masculine, suburban and metropolitan cultures—which pertained more generally during this period. In the terms of Reed Whittmore’s 1962 essay, “The Two Rooms: Humor in Modern American Verse,” McGinley chose the “rumpus room” of light verse over the “stone room” of serious poetry.¹⁸ Those few critics who have explicitly written about the genre have tended to do so defensively and with some ambivalence. W. H. Auden, in the foreword to his *Oxford Book of Light Verse* (1938) opens by insisting that “light verse *can* be serious” (emphasis added) while in his poem *Letters from Iceland* (1937), he writes:

Light verse, poor girl, is under a sad weather;
Except by Milne and persons of that kind
She’s treated as *démodé* altogether.¹⁹

His faintly embarrassed “*démodé*” offers an accurate reflection of contemporary perceptions of the form, while its gendering as feminine offers further explanation for its (and McGinley’s) critical dismissal. The implied contempt for light verse’s audience (“persons of that kind”) and the accusation that the form panders to the lowest common denominator (the masses to whom Plath accuses McGinley of selling out) further undermine McGinley’s reputation and anticipate the later consensus, reported by Robert Von Hallberg, that the suburban audiences for whom she wrote form an “inclusive readership that displays no very definite characteristics of taste.”²⁰

Nevertheless, the distraction and light relief offered by McGinley’s verse suited the popular mood in Depression-era and then war-time America, helping to sustain her considerable popularity. An unsigned 1946 article, “Woman Poet’s Pen is Barb,” in the *New York World Telegram* credits her not only with resuscitating light verse but also with keeping poetry itself alive through the troubled years of the war:

Some critics competent to express an opinion, believe the light poets, and particularly Phyllis McGinley, have done a great service to the art in the past decade by merely turning out their product.

These critics have a theory that people would have stopped reading poetry altogether if the lighter things had not been forthcoming and steadily amusing. The light poets have kept one foot in the door. By treading lightly, poetry survived the decade of World War II.²¹

McGinley's success in the genre had, at one time, been applauded as an (implicitly) feminist achievement: "Thirty-five years ago, the successful writing of light verse was pretty well monopolized by men Today a woman holds primacy among the gifted few."²² But as light verse fell from favor, so too did its foremost exponent. As the immediate crises of the 1930s and 1940s receded and the cautious 1950s began to make way for the more radical 1960s, the nation's mood changed, and the more explicitly engaged and intimate poetry of contemporaries such as the confessionals began to dominate. As new media—primarily television—increased its hold over the country and the circulation of the popular magazines that were McGinley's foremost market began to decline, her readership and thus her profile began to shrink.

McGinley spent much of the rest of her career oscillating between defending light verse, denying that her work exemplified the form, and arguing for the need to efface such arbitrary poetic boundaries. In a 1941 radio interview, she commented on the difficulty of balancing her dual responsibilities as housewife and writer. The interviewer responded by suggesting that it would be even more difficult if she wrote "serious" poetry, ending with the proposition that "it must be fairly simple to toss off light verse."²³ McGinley responded vigorously: "That's what everybody says, and it makes me furious. I work like mad over my poems—in fact, I spend every spare minute on them and some minutes that are not spare."²⁴ Looking back over her own work in 1960, McGinley defended her practice: "I've done one useful thing . . . I have helped restore the respectability of light verse to poetry."²⁵

In 1961, when she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, she might have felt that this task was near completion. One of the judges, Untermeyer, wrote to her shortly before the winner was announced, enclosing a report on the shortlisted poets.²⁶ McGinley was astonished, and replied: "Never, never, never will the P____r Prize be given to a writer of unserious poetry. It will go this year as in other eras to some one more intellectual, more grave, more gnomic than I. And doubtless much more deserving."²⁷ When the prize did "go" her way, McGinley was so shocked that, as she later explained, she gave up writing poetry: "After I got the Pulitzer Prize I decided to call it a day. I had done my best, I could do no better, and perhaps would do worse."²⁸

It is clear that McGinley and many of her reviewers (and indeed other practitioners such as Ogden Nash, who in a 1933 letter to McGinley, exempted her from his general opinion that "most light verse is awful")

were profoundly ambivalent about the label.²⁹ The popular consensus that light verse was narrow, domestic, and insignificant seems, in the end, to have infiltrated her own perception of the mode. The tentative claim she makes for her poetry's import in a 1954 talk to the *Cosmopolitan* book club is worthy of note: "If it has any merit, it is the merit of recognition. The subjects I take are ordinary ones—but they are universal. And I like to think I have illuminated them a little. I look at the world from a small, suburban window."³⁰

III. Anthologies

McGinley's poetry rarely made the key anthologies that defined the poetry of the age and consolidated reputations. By 1950, when John Ciardi's influential *Mid-Century American Poets* appeared, McGinley was already the author of five collections of poetry—*On the Contrary* (1934), *One More Manhattan* (1937), *A Pocketful of Wry* (1940), *Husbands are Difficult* (1941), and *Stones from a Glass House* (1946)—yet her work was not included.³¹ Neither did she make it into F. O. Matthiessen's 1950 *The Oxford Book of American Verse*, whose stated aim of including poets "with a fairly substantial body of work from which to choose," one might think would have favored McGinley.³² One might also have expected to see her work in Untermeyer's compendious and frequently revised *Modern American Poetry*—at least from the fifth edition (1936) onwards—the foreword to which claims: "More than ever the aim [of the anthology] has been to reflect the range and diversity of recent American poetry by making the compilation inclusive rather than exclusive."³³ The sixth edition (1942) explicitly refers to the importance of "humorous" or "light" verse but still excludes McGinley's work.³⁴ It is not until the eighth edition of 1962, by which time McGinley had been writing for over thirty years and had won the Pulitzer Prize, that her work at last appears. Here, though, she is used largely as a foil for the alarming new confessional mode just coming to dominance (W. D. Snodgrass and Sexton appear for the first time; Robert Lowell had made it into the seventh edition some twelve years earlier) and as a reminder of light verse's role in maintaining the status quo. Untermeyer explains his rationale:

In an age preoccupied with the debased and distorted, Phyllis McGinley concerns herself with the shapes of what is everyone's occupational commonplace. . . . she is almost abnormally normal.

In contrast to those who are at ease only with the bizarre, she is at home with what others have rejected as too familiar and too unimportant for poetry.³⁵

Alan Golding has argued (citing poet Robert Duncan's initial objection to inclusion in Donald Allen's *New American Poetry*, 1960) that anthologies

such as these have a “canonizing thrust” and are “dominated by aspirations toward taste-making, career-building, influence, and representation of a period.”³⁶ We might also add that they have typically functioned to endorse male poetic relationships and to marginalize women poets’ work. Golding notes of *New American Poetry* that its poetics are “heavily gendered male” and “require for their sustenance the exclusion or minimal presence of women writers” (p. 199). McGinley was not the only woman to be excluded from such anthologies (interestingly, her place in Untermeyer’s 1962 *Modern American Poetry* is at the cost of H. D.’s deletion from the list). When Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson’s *New Poets of England and America* appeared in 1957 with just six women chosen for inclusion alongside several hundred men, Plath noted the gender imbalance and declared herself to be “Jealous . . ., green-eyed, spite-seething.”³⁷ It is doubly unfortunate for McGinley’s long-term reputation that her public antipathy to feminism and the apparent reticence and lack of engagement in her light verse prevented her inclusion in anthologies such as Cora Kaplan’s *Salt and Bitter and Good: Three Centuries of English and American Women Poets* (1975) or Louise Bernikow’s *The World Split Open: Women Poets 1552-1950* (1974), which flourished from the 1970s onwards and might have made good her omission from the male-dominated mainstream.³⁸

McGinley was further excluded—or excluded herself—by not participating in the readings and poetry tours that were becoming increasingly important to the establishment of poetic reputations and that in the case of, say, Sexton, proved fundamental to her consolidation of a distinctive poetic voice.³⁹ McGinley had decided early in her career not to read from or discuss her work in public and accepted few such invitations. We might speculate that this was on the grounds of her own persistently troubled health or because of a profound lack of confidence in her poetic gift. It may also have stemmed from a reluctance to step away from the persona she had constructed for herself as, above all else, a wife, mother, and homemaker.

One of McGinley’s few public performances seems only to have reinforced her distance—and difference—from the practices and trends that dominated post-war poetry. Her 1953 poem “In Praise of Diversity,” originally written for Columbia University’s Phi Beta Kappa ceremony, was revised in 1965 for presentation at President and Mrs. Johnson’s ill-fated White House Festival of the Arts (the Festival had been conceived as a way of enhancing the cultural life of the nation). Robert Lowell had publicly and controversially refused his invitation to the event in protest at the President’s policy on Vietnam although other writers including Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, and Mark Van Doren did appear.⁴⁰ McGinley honored her commitment to read at the festival but added a penultimate stanza to her original poem, ending:

And let us, for once, praise Presidents
Providing Dream its festival hour.
And while the pot of culture's bubblesome
Praise poets even when they're troublesome.⁴¹

Her contribution was mocked by Dwight Macdonald in the *New York Review of Books*. His dismissal of her work speaks to the tensions of the day and epitomizes, albeit in exaggerated form, the attitude of some other reviewers:

Next came Phyllis McGinley, a pleasant-looking matron in a flowered hat After "Apologia," a soggy pastiche of Housman and Millay, she swung into her big number, lasting eight or nine minutes, "In Praise of Diversity" Ever the obliging poetaster, Miss McGinley inserted, for the occasion, six new lines which take a firm, positive stand in favour of both and indeed all sides.⁴²

We can see, then, that for diverse reasons, McGinley occupied an uneasy position in relation to the dominant poetic tendencies of the period.

IV. *The Suburbs*

McGinley's reputation as the "Poet Laureate of Suburbia" further alienated her from a metropolitan cultural elite.⁴³ Across the twentieth century, the American suburbs saw enormous growth, triggered by multiple factors. These included, in the first half of the century, the proliferation of car ownership and the development of road and rail links, demographic changes (incoming black settlers from the southern states and migrants from Europe prompted many white families to seek what they perceived to be better—for which read more homogeneous—neighbourhoods outside the cities), and ideological pressures that promoted the expansion of home ownership as the foundation of a stable democracy.⁴⁴ By the end of World War II, conditions were right for the further proliferation of the suburbs.

Such growth prompted considerable anxiety among commentators. From the mid-1950s onwards, we see a plethora of sociological, psychological, and literary accounts of suburban angst.⁴⁵ Each of these expresses concern about what the suburban way of life was doing to those who endured it: to men (in William H. Whyte's 1956 *The Organization Man*), to family and community (in John Keat's *The Crack in the Picture Window* of the same year), and to women (most famously in Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*).⁴⁶ In each of these studies, life in the suburbs is experienced as a problem. For Friedan, famously, it is the "problem that has no name" (p. 15). For McGinley, the suburbs did not seem to be a problem at all. She refused to see suburbia (and specifically, women's experience of everyday suburban life) as a source of concern and saw it instead, in essays such as

“Suburbia, of Thee I Sing” (1949) and in her sequence “Sonnets from the Suburbs” (1960), as cause for celebration.⁴⁷ As the former proudly explains, “I have lived in the country. I have lived in the city. I have lived in an average Middle Western small town. But for the best fifteen years of my life I have lived in Suburbia, and I like it” (p. 124). Where Friedan saw the suburban home as a trap, McGinley saw it as full of possibilities. In a July 1968 article commissioned by the *Saturday Evening Post* on the theme of “The New American Family,” McGinley describes her “suburban terrace” as a new “frontier” and a place of hope.⁴⁸

In the fiction of Richard Yates, John Cheever, and John Updike, the suburbs stand for narrow conformity, for acquiescence, for the closing off of personal, social, and creative opportunity. Catherine Jurca has critiqued the domination of the “suburban literary tradition” by a cluster of “discontented” white males; McGinley’s poetry contributes a wholly different perspective on the contemporary suburban condition.⁴⁹ Where their work critiques the suburban status quo, hers seems to endorse it. Such enthusiasm placed her at odds with literary commentators of the time for whom urbanity was to be valued and the “suburban” despised. Her affectionate, if idealized, portrayal of white, middle-class suburban women’s lives was out of step with the contemporary turn towards the city (as, for example, in the poetry of the New York and San Francisco schools that emerged at this time) and also put her at odds with commentators such as poet Gwendolyn Brooks, who noted the disjunction between McGinley’s representations and the lived experience of many:

Average Reader will close this hymn to Suburbia and the life suburban with a sigh, thinking, ‘most things are nice in Phyllis McGinleyland.’

The life depicted in this collection of articles . . . seems so full of sun and sweet reasonableness that Average Reader takes heart and is glad—glad to realize that, in various areas of modern society, so rugged, generally, with the horrors of fear, sick speed, and hatred, there can be found charm and joy at home and abroad.⁵⁰

Peg Bracken, author of the best-selling bible of anti-domesticity, *The I Hate to Cook Book* (1960), was similarly sceptical, observing—apparently without irony—that “as housewives go, Miss McGinley is roaringly untypical. A Pulitzer Prize winner . . . surely has her ego more thoroughly cosseted than do most of her purely housewife sisters, and surely makes more money.”⁵¹

V. Money

McGinley was pragmatic about the need to write for a market. Dorothy Parker, her peer and fellow contributor to the *New Yorker*, claimed a similar defense. Asked in an interview about the “source of most of her work,” Parker replied: “Need of money, dear.”⁵² Again and again, McGinley

indicated that for financial reasons, she had accepted inadvisable commissions or permitted lesser work to be published—at inevitable cost to her long-term reputation. In an undated journal entry (1949?), she confessed, “Have typed ‘Open Letter to Santa Claus’ and will send it off to the NY’er. It is certainly second rate but I hope they’ll take it. I’ve never been broker.”⁵³ In the same journal, after reading Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), she expressed regret that “given a little money of my own, how much better I might have done! I have never written a line (since my first weak little murmurings) that didn’t go to keep the pot boiling.”

Damaging though creative compromise may have been to McGinley’s sense of her own value as a writer and to her lasting reputation, it is clear that she made a significant income from writing. As early as 1937, she was earning \$2.50 per line of poetry from the *New Yorker*.⁵⁴ Using the most conservative of possible calculations, this would amount to some \$83 per line today.⁵⁵ Tax returns in the early 1960s show that she was earning \$18,000 per year from writing (her husband, a senior executive for a telephone company, was earning around \$2,000 per year less), translating to a minimum of \$159,000 and \$141,000 per annum respectively at today’s values. By 1966, she had secured a first-reading contract with the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, which would pay \$3,000 per article.⁵⁶ In 1969, she queried a fee of \$3,300 from the *Reader’s Digest* for a 2,000 word essay on “Telephone Manners,” prompting her agent to explain, with some exasperation: “Truly, Phyllis, it is a good price for a relatively casual essay that does not require in-depth research.”⁵⁷ At today’s value, \$3,300 would equate to a conservative \$20,255. In a 1959 letter to a fellow poet, Ciardi recorded a chance conversation with McGinley about their relative earnings:

A while back when I had collected a fat \$10-a-line check from *LHJ* [*Ladies’ Home Journal*] I ran into Phyllis McGinley who was aglow with *LHJ* gelt and was saying “What lovely rates!” Whereupon I was chortling back right with her, in such wise as, e.g.: “Boy, kiddo, you said a mouthful!” or words similar. Whereupon in the happy bubbling of both our percolators I heard her say in the same tone: “Imagine, \$750 for two sonnets!”⁵⁸

Such high fees from periodicals were a measure of the circulation of the magazines that accepted McGinley’s work and of her huge popularity among readers. The *Ladies’ Home Journal*, for instance, was selling six million copies monthly in 1959—a feat that prompted the vice president and advertising director to write an appreciative note to McGinley, observing that this was “the first women’s magazine in history to reach this record. You have helped the Journal reach this memorable milestone.”⁵⁹ During this period—the last, golden days of magazine publishing before the mass adoption of television decimated their advertising revenues and forced them into decline—popular magazines such as these were major poetry

publishers. A typical 1950s issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* would publish at least three poems per week while the *Ladies' Home Journal*, in the same decade, published between six and twelve poems per month including, for example, in the August 1956 issue, Marianne Moore's Columbia University Phi Beta Kappa poem "Blessed is the Man" and Adrienne Rich's "Lullaby."

VI. "Lady Poets"

McGinley wrote in a mode that seemed lightweight, inconsequential, small-scale, and thereby, according to the ideology of the day, feminine. Like many other women poets of her (and indeed succeeding) generations, she was roundly patronized by a literary and metropolitan elite. Auden supplied the foreword for her Pulitzer Prize-winning collected poems, *Times Three*, damning her work with faint praise in the first few lines alone: "Phyllis McGinley needs no puff. Her poems are known and loved by tens of thousands. They call for no learned exegesis."⁶⁰ The *Manchester Guardian*, reviewing the collection in 1961, opined that "her world is largely the daily round of domestic triviality; she writes like a housewife who has gone on noticing her surroundings."⁶¹ Successors such as Sexton, Plath, and, in the present day, Sharon Olds have also, at key points in their careers, been sidelined for their choice of a mode (confession) that, while rather different from light verse, nevertheless seems in its intimacy, immediacy, and biographical referentiality to be similarly feminine and thereby undeserving of serious attention. Plath was provoked into defending the latent seriousness and relevance of her own writing, insisting in a 1962 interview that "personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be *relevant*, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on."⁶² McGinley similarly justified her work on the grounds of its latent scope, conceding that although she wrote out of her "own experience," "I try to do it with wit. And by doing this, I hope to illuminate a social pattern and a larger world."⁶³ She was at pains to point out the profundity of what may, on the surface, appear to be merely frivolous, commenting of her 1954 book *The Love Letters of Phyllis McGinley* that it was the "most nearly serious verse I've written" and adding that "most writers of light verse are moralists. Light verse runs to satire, satire to criticism."⁶⁴ In a 1960 *Newsweek* profile, she went further still:

"I'm so sick of this 'Phyllis McGinley, suburban housewife and mother of two . . .'" she said. "That's all true, but it's accidental. I write about the village here, and the family, but that's only an eighth or a tenth of my work. The rest is different. There's a hell of a lot of straight social criticism."⁶⁵

A close reading of her poetry confirms her point; in apparently affectionate portraits such as “Country Club Sunday,” “Executive’s Wife,” or “Beauty Parlor” (all first appeared in 1946 and were republished in the sequence “Sonnets from the Suburbs”), the benign surface masks rather more unsettling depths. In each case, the sonnet form is used to great effect in order first to establish, and then at the turn between the octet and sestet to undermine, the security of the situation. In “Country Club Sunday,” for example, which opens “It is a beauteous morning, calm and free / The fairways sparkle. Gleam the shaven grasses,” the promising morning soon gives way to a scene of anxious surveillance (populated by “sandalad women” who are ranked on “terraces” overlooking the terrain).⁶⁶ Class, racial, generational, and gender conflict are all subtly registered here: the stewards—possibly African American citizens—“hastily” fetch ice for the impatient Country Club elite; the proto-delinquent “shrill adolescent” troubles the calm of the swimming pool; and the women are forced into the position of monitoring and finally compensating for the behavior of the men (p. 137). The whole is bound up with tacit signs of alcohol abuse. In the words of the final stanza:

Nothing remains of last night’s Summer Formal
 Save palms and streamers and the wifely glance,
 Directed with more watchfulness than normal,
 At listless mate who tugs his necktie loose,
 Moans, shuns the light, and gulps tomato juice. (p. 137)⁶⁷

The second-wave feminist movement that came to prominence during this period might have provided McGinley with new ways of understanding and articulating the issues she registers here. But in spite of her own experience of combining a successful career as a writer with her domestic responsibilities, McGinley was always ambivalent about feminism. As early as 1950, she referred in her journal to her “newest hobby—anti-feminism” and was subsequently to define herself as “the opposite of a feminist.”⁶⁸ In a 1965 interview in *Sign* magazine, she argued that “the ‘problem without a name’ that Betty Friedan talks about . . . and Simone de Beauvoir’s great cry of self-pity are pretty much nonsense.”⁶⁹

McGinley’s antagonism was, perhaps, prescient, for it was the rise of the second-wave feminist movement that ultimately doomed her reputation even though it, at first, proved something of a boon to her career. *Sixpence in her Shoe*, a 1964 collection of essays in celebration and defence of “woman’s most honorable profession” (to quote the tag line) was commissioned by her publishers as a “riposte” to *The Feminine Mystique* and celebrates “the glory of housewifery.”⁷⁰ Its popularity brought McGinley financial security and confirmed her in the role of guardian of home, family, and femininity in a 1960s America that seemed, to some, dangerously shaken. Sheaves

of fan mail in her personal papers indicate both women and men were relieved, at last, that someone seemed to be on the side of the status quo. As one typical letter from a fan affirmed:

How I have smarted lately under the stir of the numerous articles railing against educated women who “waste” their knowledge and abilities being “merely” housewives and mothers. How guilty they have made me feel! Yet, beneath this feeling, I have felt so deeply the thoughts which you bring out so clearly . . . Thank you, dear Miss McGinley.⁷¹

Nevertheless, it is clear that the mothers and homemakers who had, hitherto, been McGinley’s primary audience were being offered new narratives and new voices—including those of poets such as Sexton, Rich, Margaret Atwood, and Nikki Giovanni—so that her readership was shrinking in size and feeling itself to be increasingly embattled.

VII. *Legacy*

McGinley’s disappearance from the scholarly record is significant for a number of reasons. Without an appreciation of her role in mid-century poetry, in suburban discourse, and in the development of a particular, and popular, light verse form, it is difficult to reach substantive conclusions about the place of each of these in modern American culture. Without an understanding of the nuances of her relationship both to a masculine tradition and to an emergent feminist poetics, we risk replicating a set of binaries that leaves no space for dissenting, contradictory, or excessive voices such as hers. Specifically, without a sure sense of McGinley’s work, we are unable to identify or evaluate her influence on important successor poets—those like Plath, Sexton, and Bishop whose work, as I will go on to argue, McGinley makes possible.

Plath was, as an apprentice poet, a keen reader of McGinley’s work. In a spirited letter to her mother of February 1955, she described advances in her own creative practice and vowed, “Some day Phyllis McGinley will hear from me. They can’t shut me up.”⁷² One year later, she named her as one of the simultaneously married and literary women (a rare combination, according to Plath) whom she admired.⁷³ Plath’s early villanelle, the often overlooked (probably 1955) poem “The Dispossessed,” echoes McGinley’s work in its evocation of everyday suburban women’s lives.⁷⁴ The form is as important as the theme here; the villanelle with its ceaseless, circling repetition invokes the claustrophobia of the situation and mimics the demanding forms that McGinley favored. By late March of 1958, though, Plath claimed to have disavowed this influence:

I think I have written lines which qualify me to be The Poetess of America
. . . . Who rivals? Well, in history—Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning,

Christina Rossetti, Amy Lowell, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay—
all dead. Now: Edith Sitwell & Marianne Moore, the ageing giantesses &
poetic godmothers. Phyllis McGinley is out—light verse: she’s sold herself.⁷⁵

Yet this entry immediately follows one where Plath mentioned that she has submitted a new batch of poems, including a sestina (a similar tight form to those that McGinley favored) to the latter’s journal of choice, the *New Yorker*. Plath was an avid reader of the magazine and was to publish her first poem there in 1958, subsequently, like McGinley, earning a much-valued first-reading agreement. Other late poems also demonstrate a lingering—if subtle—debt to McGinley. In “Daddy,” one of the best-known *Ariel* (1966) poems—which Plath was unexpectedly to dismiss in an interview with A. Alvarez as “a piece of ‘light verse’”—we see traces of the sardonic voice and emphatic rhyme common to McGinley’s poetry and to light verse more generally.⁷⁶ The October 1962 poem “Lesbos” reveals echoes of McGinley’s poem “Eros in the Kitchen” (first published in the *New Yorker* in January 1952 and reprinted in *The Love Letters of Phyllis McGinley* and *Times Three*) even though Plath used the model in order emphatically to overturn it.⁷⁷

McGinley’s “Eros in the Kitchen” is a curiously duplicitous poem. The title seems at first comic and bathetic. However, if we read “Eros” not only as the Greek god of love but also as Freud’s term for the pleasure principle or, more properly, for “the instincts of self-preservation and for the preservation of the species,” we arrive at a rather more complex and nuanced assessment of the poem’s meanings.⁷⁸ “Eros in the Kitchen” is written in two long stanzas of twenty-one and twelve lines with varying *abab* and couplet rhymes. It opens, emphatically, “Our cook is in love” (p. 88). Initially, the poem’s vision of domestic disarray seems comic and endearing. The household cook’s romantic distractions mean that the usual order is jettisoned (“spoons go uncounted,” “confused is the grocery list,” soufflés sink, and messages for the “Mister and Madam” go undelivered), but all this can be forgiven because the cook’s love affair reminds the speaker and her husband of their own early courtship (p. 88). They take pleasure in living the burgeoning romance vicariously: “All of us plunge or soar / With the mood of the lovers” (p. 88). The poem closes with a wistful reminder of what used to be:

Our years have grown younger. We sally to parties at night
In tall hat and long glove.
We remember what we had forgotten. The hallways are bright.
Our cook is in love. (p. 88)

Plath’s “Lesbos” writes back both to the surface ideal portrayed in McGinley’s poem and, I would argue, to its underlying discord, overturning the first and affirming the second. The “Viciousness in the kitchen!” that “Lesbos” spits out in its opening line first echoes and then rejects the “Eros

in the Kitchen” (emphasis added) of McGinley’s title, thereby highlighting the speaker’s frustration with contemporary ideologies of femininity, family, and home (“Lesbos,” p. 227). There is no room here for Eros. Instead, Plath’s relentlessly end-stopped lines—ranged, like McGinley’s, in a lengthy opening stanza followed by a shorter one and then, in Plath’s case, shorter ones again through to a final defeated or defiant (the distinction is moot) one-line conclusion—bombard the reader with a catalogue of anger, resentment, and despair. Children, animals, husband, and self are bitterly indicted. All are in disarray; mixed up, as Marsha Bryant notes, with the accoutrements of modern suburban life (fluorescent lights, staticky radio, and sleeping pills) to form a kind of “domestic surreal.”⁷⁹ What had seemed benign and affectionate in McGinley—cold food, “napkin[s] forgot,” and other signifiers of domestic disorder—here becomes grotesque and pathological (p. 88). The pleasure principle (Eros) has been displaced by the death drive (Thanatos).

Sexton, too, was an admirer of McGinley’s writing. The ingenious rhyme schemes of some of the former’s early work—particularly in her first book *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960)—reveal the debt, as do poems about family and specifically mother-daughter relationships. Sexton is fulsome in unpublished letters to McGinley about what this influence has meant to her poetic development: “I wonder if I’ve said how much I admire and relate to your poems and many other pieces of prose etc. In many ways we are quite close. There are few women, of course, who write deeply of their womanhood.”⁸⁰ McGinley seems to have appreciated Sexton’s work (although like others, she rather pulled back from the younger poet’s demands on her attention), saying of her “Pain for a Daughter” (1966), “I am in love with the poem That one does speak to everyone.”⁸¹ Unbeknownst to Sexton, her own first book was shortlisted for the 1961 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, eventually won by McGinley (Sexton went on to win the award in 1967). A leaked memo from Untermeyer, chair of the judges, enclosed in his December 1960 letter to McGinley cited earlier, explains why the latter had been thought to have the edge:

In an age preoccupied with the depressing and distorted, Phyllis McGinley occupies herself with the curious shapes of what is everyday’s occupational commonplace; in contrast to those who are at ease with the bizarre [by implication, Sexton], she is (almost abnormally normal) at home with what others have rejected as too familiar and too unimportant for poetry.⁸²

Sexton, like Plath, was attuned to the hidden ambivalence—and thus hidden strength—of McGinley’s work, although she responded more with sympathy than with rage to the tensions and contradictions of her female speakers’ lives. Her 1965 poem “Self in 1958” looks back through Plath’s “Lesbos” to McGinley’s “Eros in the Kitchen.” More importantly, it

identifies with McGinley's 1954 poem "The Doll House" (Sexton's poem was originally drafted under the title "The Lady Lives in a Doll House"). McGinley's version, written in long, meditative lines, lists the now-abandoned relics of a once-busy family life:

the Peerless Automatic
Popcorn Machine that used to fly into rages,
And the Dr. Dolittle books, and the hamsters' cages.⁸³

From McGinley's model, Sexton takes the figure of the forlorn woman—rendered here more immediate by the use of a first-person instead of third-person perspective—who, although surrounded by markers of prosperity and femininity, lacks agency and proves unable to perform the role expected of her.⁸⁴

More unexpected, perhaps, is McGinley's influence on Bishop and specifically on the latter's best-known poem, "One Art" (1976). There is no evidence of McGinley and Bishop having corresponded (although there are affectionate letters between McGinley and Moore in the former's archive). However, such was McGinley's profile during the 1950s height of her career that it seems certain that Bishop knew of her writing. Bishop first began to publish poetry in the *New Yorker* in early January 1940 with the poem "Cirque D'Hiver," earning her own first-reading agreement in November 1946.⁸⁵ She published seven more poems over the succeeding decade, five in the 1950s, and in June and December 1953, two short stories.⁸⁶ McGinley was a regular contributor to the magazine throughout this time. By then, Bishop was living in Brazil, but it is evident from her correspondence that she continued to access this and other American periodicals.

In the 3 October 1953 issue of the *New Yorker*, McGinley was to publish what she subsequently, and repeatedly, identified as one of her best poems, "Ballade of Lost Objects"—a poem that she cited as illustrative of using "a light verse form to enclose a serious idea."⁸⁷ It was subsequently reproduced in *The Love Letters of Phyllis McGinley*, *Times Three*, and reprinted in the 1965 *Time* magazine profile, "The Telltale Hearth." In the 26 April 1976 issue of the *New Yorker*, Bishop published "One Art"—a poem that significantly, because uncharacteristically, she had written in just a few months at the end of 1975. Her poems more typically, as Alice Quinn and others have shown, went through years of gestation.⁸⁸ The drafts of Bishop's poem indicate that it was originally entitled "How to Lose Things" or "The Gift of Losing Things." Arguably, Bishop's draft titles borrow the adjective "lost" from McGinley's title and poem. Rendering this word as a verb in its infinitive ("to Lose") and then present-participle ("Losing") establishes a starting point for the more immediate process of losing that her final poem invokes. For several reasons, I would regard Bishop's as the better poem.

Nevertheless, it is arguable that, in this and other ways, it owes a debt to McGinley.

McGinley's "Ballade of Lost Objects" uses the complex "ballade" form (*ababbcbc* in each stanza followed by an envoi rhyming *bcbc*); Bishop's "One Art" takes the form of the villanelle. The effect in both cases is to emphasise the immensity of the loss that can only be endured if contained within tight poetic limits. The repetition of the line "The art of losing isn't hard to master" in Bishop's villanelle echoes the repetition of the final envoi line ("And where in the world did the children vanish?") in McGinley's ballade.⁸⁹ In each case, the circularity and repetitiveness of the chosen form reinforce the claustrophobia of the situation, exemplifying the speaker's struggle to escape her grief. McGinley explained in a 1960 interview:

I think that "Ballade of Lost Objects" is a really good poem, and to be able to write a ballade, which is an artificial form . . . with real emotion in it, I believe it's not been done before. It's a really artificial form and usually does not carry anything so heavy as an emotion, but that one really did.⁹⁰

McGinley's poem opens with the plaintive questions, "Where are the ribbons I tie my hair with? / Where is my lipstick? Where are my hose—" and then proceeds to catalogue a succession of other misplaced objects ("Perfumes, petticoats, sports chapeaux, / The blouse Parisian, the earring Spanish") before daring, in stanzas two and three, to broach the real human loss—that of the daughters ("girls in pinafores") who are now grown into adulthood and, like "two tall strangers," have become "Neither my friends nor quite my foes" (p. 52). No longer there to borrow the speaker's material possessions, they have made away with something far more damaging—her sense of her own identity.

Bishop's poem, in its initial drafts, contained a list of lost items or everyday objects rather like McGinley's: "Mostly, one begins by 'mislaying': / keys, reading-glasses, fountain pens" (p. 225). Here, too, the material items merely mask the true loss, which is that of the longed for and now absent loved one. For both poets, the losses are incremental. In Bishop's case, we move from keys to homes to continents to the unnamed other in a movement that seems all the more devastating for its awful inevitability. McGinley's losses, although in the first stanza seemingly more arbitrary and thus less haunting, are nevertheless deeply symbolic. Her poem mourns the dissipation of the promise of youth and femininity, the passing of time, the separation from loved ones, and the inevitability of change. Both poems close with a heart-felt apostrophe to the addressee (the "Even losing you" of Bishop's final stanza; the "Prince, I warn you" of McGinley's), a final admonition to the self (Bishop's "Write it!"; McGinley's "These are my daughters, I suppose"), and a very visible attempt on the part of each speaker to reconcile herself to her ultimate loss (Bishop, p. 240; McGinley, p. 52).

McGinley's example, then, shows Plath, Sexton, and Bishop that it is possible to combine the private and the public, to use the intimacies of everyday social and domestic experience—with all its tension and ambivalence—as a way of examining “a social pattern and a larger world.”⁹¹ Her best poetry offers a set of formal, stylistic, and tonal models that can be employed—as in the case of Bishop's “One Art”—in the service of emotional or experiential truths and that later poets have learned to use, transform, and transcend by turns.

VIII. Conclusion

McGinley's marginalization in the public and critical record of twentieth-century American poetry is, as this essay has demonstrated, grounded in a number of factors. Although circumstances (her gender, changing tastes and markets, the rise of feminism) have conspired against her long-term profile, McGinley's own decisions played their part in her decline from view. She wrote primarily for money and was prepared to make creative compromises in order to earn a living; she stopped writing poetry when her career was ostensibly at its peak; she aligned herself with the “wrong” side (the pro-suburbanites and anti-feminists) at a time when the suburbs seemed to many—and in particular to metropolitan taste-makers—to stand only for complacency and ennui and when feminism was offering tantalizing new opportunities to women. Most damagingly—and, ironically in this respect, the feminist movement, which she opposed, might have been able to help her—she found it impossible to conceive of herself as a proper writer. In unguarded comments in her unpublished journal of 1949[?], cited earlier, she concedes “I love not writing. Ergo, I am not, by vocation, a writer at all.”⁹² In this rather bleak self-evaluation, arguably, lies the real reason for McGinley's disappearance from the record.

Nevertheless, as I have shown, McGinley's life and work deserve notice for many reasons. The history of the production and reception of her poetry prompts us to rethink the perceived relationship between light and serious verse. It also compels us to look beyond the apparently rigid boundaries that divide mass, middlebrow, and elite poetries—and audiences. Her *oeuvre* evidences the fluidity and diversity of the genre within a period that has otherwise been characterized as one of “hard-and-fast cultural distinctions, exclusions, hierarchies—between a poem and not-a-poem; between masscult and midcult, or highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow.”⁹³ By examining her work in relation to that of an unexpectedly wide range of peers and successors, we are prompted to look again—and critically—at “the assumptions underlying the way modern literary history has been written” and to revise our sense of key figures, trends, and lines of influence.⁹⁴ McGinley's verse illuminates debates about poetry's place and audience in

mid-century culture, about suburban identity, and about everyday feminine experience. It demonstrates an adroit use of form and tone. And it plays an important role in establishing routes that her better-equipped legatees were able to follow.

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NOTES

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¹ John Deedy, "The Poet Laureate of Suburbia," *U. S. Catholic and Jubilee*, December 1969, 22-27.

² The sales figures for *The Love Letters of Phyllis McGinley* are from Gina Bellafante, "Suburban Rapture," *The New York Times*, 24 December 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/28/books/review/Bellafante-t.html?_r=0. For figures for *Times Three*, see "The Telltale Hearth," *Time*, 18 June 1965, 74-78.

³ Linda W. Wagner, *Phyllis McGinley* (New York: Twayne, 1971); Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Stephen Burt, *The Forms of Youth: Twentieth-Century Poetry and Adolescence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Nancy Walker, "Humor and Gender Roles: The 'Funny' Feminism of the Post-World War II Suburbs," *American Quarterly*, 37 (1985), 98-113; and Jo Gill, *Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).

⁴ Jay Parini and Brett C. Millier, eds. *The Columbia History of American Poetry: From the Puritans to Our Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁵ Zofia Burr has similarly argued of McGinley's peer—California poet Josephine Miles—that "her attention to poetic convention produced obstacles for feminist critics who wanted to value her as one who resisted a masculinist culture"; see Burr, *Of Women, Poetry, and Power: Strategies of Address in Dickinson, Miles, Brooks, Lorde, and Angelou* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 80.

⁶ "Phyllis McGinley," *Current Biography*, November 1961, 22-23.

⁷ From its inception in the late nineteenth century, the *Saturday Evening Post*

aimed to be “the medium of an American consciousness. . . . it was designed to reach audiences ignored by ‘highbrow’ magazines like *Harper’s* and the *Atlantic*”; see Jan Cohn, *Creating America: George Horace Lorimer and the “Saturday Evening Post”* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 9. With its sister periodical, *Ladies’ Home Journal* (founded in 1883), it “exemplified and conveyed to [its] readers a powerful and mutually reinforcing mix of gender and commerce that had come to characterize a significant segment of American popular culture by the turn of the century”; see Helen Damon-Moore, *Magazines for the Millions: Gender and Commerce in the “Ladies’ Home Journal” and the “Saturday Evening Post,” 1880-1910* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 2.

⁸ Kirk Douglas to Phyllis McGinley, 15 February 1964, box 8, Phyllis McGinley Papers, Syracuse University Library; and Groucho Marx to McGinley, 11 March 1953, 17 September 1954, 25 November 1960, 31 December 1964, box 14, McGinley Papers.

⁹ John Holmes to McGinley, 27 April 1961, box 11, McGinley Papers.

¹⁰ Franklin B. Wiley to McGinley, 21 December 1925, box 12, McGinley Papers.

¹¹ K[atjarine] S. White to McGinley, 28 February 1934, box 17, McGinley Papers. McGinley’s first poem in the *New Yorker* was “To A Reckless Lady’s Ghost,” 23 January 1932, 32; and her last was “A Dream of Gifties,” 9 July 1960, 30. A *New Yorker* first-reading agreement gave the magazine first refusal on all works written by the author in a given genre (in this case, poetry) for the duration of the agreement and guaranteed payment of a per-line fee plus additional bonuses for cost-of-living and on signature or renewal of the agreement. Sylvia Plath and Elizabeth Bishop were subsequently to hold similar agreements.

¹² Ben Yagoda, *About Town: The “New Yorker” and the World it Made* (London: Duckworth, 2000), 172. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹³ McGinley, “Why We Teach,” undated and unpaginated ms draft, box 42, McGinley Papers.

¹⁴ White to McGinley, 18 January 1935, box 17, McGinley Papers.

¹⁵ McGinley, “Why We Teach.”

¹⁶ Malcolm Johnson to McGinley, 14 April 1934, box 8, McGinley Papers.

¹⁷ Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 360.

¹⁸ Reed Whittemore, “The Two Rooms: Humor in Modern American Verse,” *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 5 (1964), 191.

¹⁹ W. H. Auden, introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), ix; and Auden and Louis MacNeice, *Letters from Iceland*, quoted in Whittemore, “The Two Rooms,” 185.

²⁰ Robert Von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 16.

²¹ “Woman Poet’s Pen is a Barb,” *New York World Telegram*, 21 December 1946, 9.

²² Review of *Times Three*, by McGinley, *The Sign*, November 1960, 65.

²³ Adelaide Hawley, “Woman’s Page of the Air,” transcript of interview with Phyllis McGinley, 27 November 1941, Columbia Broadcasting System, box 43, McGinley Papers.

²⁴ Hawley, “Woman’s Page of the Air.”

²⁵ Quoted in an unsigned review of *Times Three*, by McGinley, *The Critic*, October/November 1960, 29.

²⁶ Louis Untermeyer to McGinley, 7 December 1960, box 22, McGinley Papers.

²⁷ McGinley to Untermeyer, 9 December 1960, box 22, McGinley Papers.

²⁸ McGinley to Linda Wagner, 11 March 1968, box 23, McGinley Papers. Dorothy Parker claims to have made a similar decision: “my verse is terribly dated—as anything once fashionable is dreadful now. I gave it up, knowing it wasn’t getting any better, but nobody seemed to notice my magnificent gesture”; see Parker, interview by Marion Capron, in *Women Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, ed. George Plimpton (New York: Modern Library, 1998), 108.

²⁹ Ogden Nash to McGinley, 8 May 1933, box 9, McGinley Papers.

³⁰ McGinley, untitled transcript of talk given to the *Cosmopolitan* book club, 2 March 1954, box 47, McGinley Papers.

³¹ John Ciardi, ed., *Mid-Century American Poets* (New York: Twayne, 1950).

³² F. O. Matthiessen, ed., *The Oxford Book of American Verse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), ix.

³³ Untermeyer, ed., *Modern American Poetry*, 5th ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1936), v.

³⁴ Untermeyer, ed., *Modern American Poetry*, 6th ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1942), vi.

³⁵ Untermeyer, ed., *Modern American Poetry*, 8th ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1962), 595.

³⁶ Alan Golding, “The New American Poetry Revisited, Again,” *Contemporary Literature*, 39 (1998), 189. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³⁷ Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 315.

³⁸ Cora Kaplan, *Salt and Bitter and Good: Three Centuries of English and American Women Poets* (New York: Paddington Press, 1975); and Louise Bernikow, *The World Split Open: Four Centuries of Women Poets in England and America, 1552-1950* (New York: Vintage, 1974; London: Women’s Press, 1979).

³⁹ Donald Allen, ed., preface to *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), xi. See also Gill, *Anne Sexton’s Confessional Poetics*, 109-36; and Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (London: Virago, 1991), 293-311. Useful comparisons can be drawn between Sexton’s essay “The Freak Show” (1973) and an unpublished draft article “Guest of Dishonor” by McGinley in which she discloses her distaste at being obliged to “sing for [her] supper for the benefit of those curious folk willing to pay three dollars for the privilege of eating a dollar dinner and gazing upon live writers at their food”; see Sexton, “The Freak Show,” *The American Poetry Review*, May/June 1973, 38-40; and McGinley, “Guest of Dishonor,” box 40, McGinley Papers.

⁴⁰ Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography* (London: Faber, 1983), 320-27. See Robert Lowell, *Collected Prose*, ed. Robert Giroux (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 370-71, for a transcript of his letter to Johnson declining the invitation.

⁴¹ McGinley, handwritten amendment to “In Praise of Diversity,” box 23, McGinley Papers.

⁴² Dwight Macdonald, “A Day at the White House,” *The New York Review of Books*, 15 July 1965, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1965/jul/15/a-day-at-the-white-house/?page=2>.

⁴³ Deedy, "The Poet Laureate of Suburbia," 22.

⁴⁴ Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 55. See also Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue, eds., *The New Suburban History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) for an excellent reappraisal of suburban history, specifically in relation to class, ethnicity, and race.

⁴⁵ Donald Katz identifies 1959 as a turning point in the post-war period: "Suddenly suburban family life was under fire from all quarters"; see Katz, *Home Fires: An Intimate Portrait of One Middle-Class Family in Postwar America* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 121. Nancy A. Miller concurs: "By the late 1950s, an elitist cultural backlash against the suburbs was well underway"; see Miller, "The General Motors Technical Center: Material Innovation and Corporate Image in the Suburban Landscape," in *Redefining Suburban Studies: Searching for New Paradigms*, ed. Daniel Rubey (Hofstra: National Center for Suburban Studies, 2009), 61.

⁴⁶ William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1956); John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956); and Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963). Subsequent references to Friedan will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁴⁷ McGinley, "Suburbia, of Thee I Sing," in *The Province of the Heart* (New York: Viking, 1959), 121-33; and McGinley, "Sonnets from the Suburbs," in *Times Three: Selected Verse from Three Decades* (New York: Viking, 1960), 133-37. Subsequent references to "Suburbia, of Thee I Sing" will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁴⁸ McGinley, "The New American Family," *Saturday Evening Post*, 13 July 1968, 26, 29, 32.

⁴⁹ Catherine Jurca, "Tales of the Suburb," in *Redefining Suburban Studies*, 172, 177. See also Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1983) on male identification with the hero of Sloan Wilson's 1955 novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*.

⁵⁰ Gwendolyn Brooks, "McGinley—Sing a Song to Suburbia," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 11 October 1959, 4.

⁵¹ Peg Bracken, "Creamy Cantos and Uncurdled Custard," *Bookweek*, 10 January 1965, 6. Bracken's *The I Hate to Cook Book* sold over three million copies. For a terrific account of the period, see Laura Shapiro, *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

⁵² Parker, interview by Marion Capron, in *Women Writers at Work*, 109.

⁵³ Phyllis McGinley, journal entry, [1949?], box 47, McGinley Papers.

⁵⁴ F. W. Fleischman to McGinley, 20 January 1937, box 17, McGinley Papers.

⁵⁵ There are various ways of computing the current value of historic income. I have used the conservative "Consumer Bundle" tariff; an alternative method would be to calculate the value in terms of share of GDP per capita. This would give a figure of \$163 today for a \$2.50 fee in 1937. See "Seven Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U. S. Dollar Amount—1774 to Present," Measuring Worth, accessed 20 May 2010, <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/>.

⁵⁶ Emile Jacobson to McGinley, 26 January 1966, box 5, McGinley Papers.

⁵⁷ Jacobson to McGinley, 20 March 1969, box 5, McGinley Papers.

⁵⁸ Ciardi to Dan Jaffe, Metuchen, 12 December 1959, in *The Selected Letters of John Ciardi*, ed. Edward M. Ciffeli (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1991), 185.

⁵⁹ Richard Ziesing, Jr. to McGinley, 23 October 1959, box 12, McGinley Papers.

⁶⁰ W. H. Auden, foreword to *Times Three*, ix.

⁶¹ Andrew Leslie, "Tinglish English," review of *Times Three*, by McGinley, *The Guardian*, 17 November 1961, 7.

⁶² Plath, interview by Peter Orr, in *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets Conducted by Hilary Morrish, Peter Orr, John Press, and Ian Scott-Kilvery* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 169-70.

⁶³ McGinley, transcript of speech for Kappa Kappa Gamma Convention, July 1952, box 47, McGinley Papers.

⁶⁴ McGinley, interview, *Richmond News Leader*, 13 April 1956, box 47, McGinley Papers.

⁶⁵ "Life with a Poet: The Lady in Larchmont," *Newsweek*, 26 September 1960, 120.

⁶⁶ McGinley, "Country Club Sunday," in *Times Three*, 137. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁶⁷ For more on alcohol abuse in the period, see Lori Rotskoff, *Love on the Rocks: Men, Women, and Alcohol in Post-World War II America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

⁶⁸ McGinley, journal entry, May [1950?], box 47, McGinley Papers; and McGinley, "Do They Love You or your Disguise?," *Glamour*, May 1961, 138.

⁶⁹ McGinley, "Woman's Place Is . . .?," interview by Sidney Callahan, *Sign*, July 1965, 22-43.

⁷⁰ "The Telltale Hearth," 75.

⁷¹ C. B. to McGinley, 27 October 1962, box 26, McGinley Papers.

⁷² Plath to [Aurelia Schober Plath], 2 February 1955, in *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*, ed. Aurelia Plath (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 156-57.

⁷³ Plath to [Aurelia Schober Plath], 17 January 1956, in *Letters Home: Correspondence, 1950-1963*, 208. McGinley was invited to stay at Yaddo, the writers' colony, in the fall of 1959—an invitation that she declined. Plath was then in residence, newly pregnant with her first child, and writing her first collection. One might speculate about what difference it would have made to both poets' writing if they had encountered each other there; see Elizabeth Ames to McGinley, 5 February 1959, box 23, McGinley Papers.

⁷⁴ Plath, "The Dispossessed," in *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 318.

⁷⁵ Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 360.

⁷⁶ Reported in A. Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath," in *Beyond All this Fiddle: Essays 1955-1967* (London: Allen Lane, 1968), 56.

⁷⁷ Plath, "Lesbos," in *Collected Poems*, 227; and McGinley, "Eros in the Kitchen," in *Times Three*, 88. Subsequent references to both poems will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁷⁸ Sigmund Freud, *An Autobiographical Study*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1948), 36.

⁷⁹ Marsha Bryant, "Ariel's Kitchen: Plath, *Ladies' Home Journal* and the Domestic Surreal," in *The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath*, ed. Anita Helle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 229.

⁸⁰ Sexton to McGinley, 2 April 1966, box 20, McGinley Papers.

⁸¹ McGinley, draft letter to Louis Simpson, 27 Jan 1967, box 18, McGinley Papers.

⁸² Untermeyer to McGinley, 7 December 1960, box 22, McGinley Papers.

⁸³ McGinley, "The Doll House," in *Times Three*, 53.

⁸⁴ Sexton, "Self in 1958," in *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 155. Carolyn Kizer's poem "Parents' Pantoum," in *Cool, Calm, and Collected: Poems, 1960-2000* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2001), 302, also bears comparison here.

⁸⁵ Bishop to Ferris Greenslet, 28 November 1946, in *One Art*, ed. Giroux (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1994), 142.

⁸⁶ For more on Bishop's relationship with the *New Yorker*, see Joelle Biele, ed., *Elizabeth Bishop and the "New Yorker": The Complete Correspondence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

⁸⁷ "Phyllis McGinley," *Current Biography*, 22.

⁸⁸ Bishop, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts and Fragments*, ed. Alice Quinn (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006), 223. See also Biele, *Elizabeth Bishop and the "New Yorker."*

⁸⁹ Bishop, draft of "One Art," in *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke Box*, 223-40; and McGinley, "Ballade of Lost Objects," in *Times Three*, 52. Subsequent references to both poems will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁹⁰ "Conversation between Phyllis McGinley and Donald McDonald," *The Critic*, June/July 1960, 72-73.

⁹¹ McGinley, transcript of speech for Kappa Kappa Gamma Convention, July 1952, box 47, McGinley Papers.

⁹² McGinley, journal entry, [1949?], box 47, McGinley Papers.

⁹³ Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 4.

⁹⁴ Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), xi.