

**Diction and Narration in I. Compton-Burnett's Novels (1925 – 1939)**

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**A thesis submitted to the University of Salford for the degree of PhD in the School  
of Arts and Media**

**The University of Salford**

**School of Arts and Media**

**2015**

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## **Acknowledgements**

My thanks are due to my two supervisors, Professor Lucie Armit and Dr Glyn White; I could not have asked for better.

Thanks also to Salford University Library Services, particularly Jennifer Earl.

I also thank Abby Bentham and my daughter Miranda for technical help.

My thanks go also to Julian Mitchell and Father Graham Forristalle SDB for conversations.

## **Abstract**

### **Diction and Narration in I. Compton-Burnett's Novels (1925 – 1939)**

Compton-Burnett (1884 – 1969) wrote the nineteen novels of her canon between 1925 and 1969. Compton-Burnett wrote retrospectively: her settings were the large country houses of the upper middle class during the late Victorian era and the early years of the twentieth century.

Critiques of her work have often taken the form of challenges to what has been perceived as excessive dialogue and a consequent lack of description, narrative, and exposition. This thesis will analyse the many devices of Compton-Burnett's diction which, subtly but powerfully, succeed in conveying to the reader that which more conventional novelists achieve by means of their lengthier passages of narration, description, and exposition; it will contend that despite the preponderance of dialogue the narrative voice is not only audible but strongly so; it works to support, amplify, and enrich the dialogue and hence make clear the narrative position. Thus the narrative voice is not as detached as has been supposed: it should be heeded.

Looking back with a penetrating and ironic eye, and informed of the progress of the landed gentry by the passage of time, the novelist discerns the undercurrents which worked to subvert the status quo, thus bringing about the beginnings of the dissolution of the upper middle class and subsequent movements during the twentieth century. She focuses on the significance of the Church, specifically the Anglican Church, on traditional gender roles, and on the effects of large-scale societal changes and developments on this class.

## Introduction

In this thesis I shall examine seven of Ivy Compton-Burnett's novels, starting with the first of what is recognised as her canon, *Pastors and Masters*, published in 1925. The second to be studied is *Brothers and Sisters* (1929), followed by *Men and Wives* (1931), *More Women than Men* (1933), *A House and its Head* (1935), and *Daughters and Sons* (1937). The last novel to be examined here is *A Family and a Fortune*, published in 1939, the outbreak of the Second World War suggesting a natural point at which to stop in view of limits of time and space. Compton-Burnett's first novel, *Dolores* (1911), about which Francis King wrote that 'it is so unlike the novels that followed it that it has no place in her canon', will not be examined (*The Spectator*, 14.12.2009).

Ivy Compton-Burnett was born in 1884, in Pinner, Middlesex. She was one of twelve children (Spurling 20), the eldest of Dr. James Compton-Burnett's second wife. Her father was a successful homeopathic doctor who worked in London and was therefore often away from his family, who lived for many years in Hove. Ivy was very close to her father, who died at the age of sixty in 1901. Ivy's mother was a beautiful and intelligent woman, who did not treat her stepchildren as well as she might have done. She became moody and difficult after her husband's death, ruling her family tyrannically and unpredictably; the household was far from settled and happy: 'Life ... was never to be merry again after the death of James Compton-Burnett' (Sprigge 30).

Unusually for a girl, Ivy was educated alongside her brothers Guy and Noel for several years, participating in their Latin and Greek lessons, before going to school at age fourteen, first to Addiscombe College, Hove, and later, for two terms, to Howard College, Bedford, which **was** run by her aunts and where she boarded. Later, she

went up to Royal Holloway College, where she read Classics. After the death of her mother in 1911 Ivy returned home to look after her younger siblings, to whom she was just as harsh and tyrannical as her mother had been. In 1915 the four younger sisters rebelled, setting up home in London with Myra Hess the pianist, where Ivy was not welcome. Ivy was left alone, and established herself in a flat in Kensington.

In 1911, her brother Guy, to whom she was particularly close, died of pneumonia; Noel, to whom she was also close, was killed in the trenches in 1916. At Christmas, 1917, her two youngest sisters were found dead in their locked bedroom; it was thought they had committed suicide. In 1918, before she had fully recovered from her grief and shock, Ivy succumbed to the epidemic of Spanish flu which swept the world, from which she was very slow to recover.

In 1919 her friend Margaret Jourdain came to share Ivy's flat, a situation which continued until Margaret's death in 1951. Margaret Jourdain was a celebrated interior designer and an expert on antique furniture; she had a wide acquaintance, and entertained many well-known figures of the time. Still not recovered from a combination of the deaths of her siblings and her illness, Ivy was at first scarcely noticed at Margaret's lively soirées, but gradually, as her work began to be published, she emerged from her shell.

In 1925 she published the first of what might be considered her canon, *Pastors and Masters*. The fourteen-year gap between this novel and *Dolores* is noteworthy: Compton-Burnett had experienced personal tragedy and illness, and had also lived through the first few of the interwar years, with their socio-historical and cultural changes. Very different in form and style from *Dolores*, *Pastors and Masters* was acknowledged as significant by some, but not always understood. By 1969, the year of her death, she had written nineteen novels (excluding *Dolores*), the last being

finished posthumously by her long-term secretary Cicely Greig, from the author's notes, and published in 1971. Compton-Burnett received increasing attention as novel followed novel, and acquired a considerable following, though none of her novels achieved best-seller status. In 1955 she was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize (for *Mother and Son*), and in 1967, two years before her death, became Dame of the British Empire.

Compton-Burnett's contemporary admirers included Robert Liddell (himself a novelist) and Charles Burkhart, an academic, both of whom critiqued her work favourably and at length during her lifetime. Liddell included an appendix on I. Compton-Burnett in his *A Treatise on the Novel* (1947), which he then incorporated in his book *The Novels of I. Compton-Burnett* (1955). Burkhart published *I. Compton-Burnett* (1965), and soon after her death edited *The Art of I. Compton-Burnett* (1972), in which he included reviews, articles, transcripts of a radio conversation and an interview, and obituaries, by prominent literary figures of the day. Also during Compton-Burnett's life-time the novelist Pamela Hansford Johnson produced a monograph, *I. Compton-Burnett* (1951), for the British Council and the National Book League, offering a penetrating critique of the novelist's work to that date. Early in the monograph, she makes a brief but, for her, damning assessment: 'she is the most amoral of living writers' (11). Hansford Johnson was troubled by the lack of poetic justice, and the lack of acknowledgement of its absence, either by the characters or the narrator in Compton-Burnett's work. Hansford Johnson was made uneasy by the move towards realism in Compton-Burnett's work.

Many of the features of Compton-Burnett's diction which caused notice throughout her writing career and have continued to do so subsequently were first highlighted by her contemporaries. In some cases, it was the lack of description of

the characters which elicited comment. R. Glynn Grylls, Mario Praz and Angus Wilson all comment on this lack, whilst Burkhart himself asserts that ‘a reader usually forgets’ Compton-Burnett’s physical descriptions (Burkhart 1965, 28) and labels them as sometimes ‘laconic and unhelpful’ (ibid. 27). More recently, Philippa Tristram’s criticism is more specific:

Their physical presence rarely conjures up an image, for it emphasizes a type rather than an individual, whilst the author provides only such additional information as would make it possible to construct a genealogy – age and descent, the latter possibly erroneous. (Tristram 27)

A recent commentator on Compton-Burnett, Hilary Mantel, has offered her own astute critique:

Ivy’s descriptions of her characters are seldom memorable, but they are done to a formula which has meaning in itself. She is interested in how ancestry shows in face and figure; how, and in what proportion, the features of parents and grandparents are blended in each individual... Descent has its logic and its laws ... her characters fit into a hierarchy... (Mantel x)

Both Compton-Burnett’s contemporaries and later commentators remark also on the omission in the novels of ‘virtually all description of setting’ (Burkhart, 1965, 28). Perhaps the clearest and fullest expression of these perceptions is by Edward Sackville-West:

...a Compton-Burnett novel is not concerned with decoration or with observation of the merely contingent, nor is it interested in exhibiting the author’s personality or in exploiting a romantic dream ... These novels contain very few descriptive passages, and none where description is

indulged in for its own sake, or for Impressionistic ends; and in this connection it is significant that Miss Compton-Burnett seems to scorn the aid of images... (Cited in Burkhart 1972, 111-12).

Tristram strongly disagrees with Sackville-West's implied acceptance of Compton-Burnett's stance in regard to the lack of scene-setting, and suggests that it 'may sometimes appear as a perverse alienation of her readership' (Tristram 27). She continues,

She makes no effort, for the uninitiated, to give substance to her country houses or their inhabitants. ... Furniture, rooms, houses and estates are generic, for as settings their interest is purely extrinsic: if shabby, they connote precarious gentility; if cramped, they suggest restricted and probably dependent means. (ibid.)

Other critiques have considered the absence of psychological analysis in the novels. Burkhart first labels the novels' point of view as 'external'; he then goes on:

In a novel written by the external method we see the characters and hear them, and we also learn about them by what the author has to say about them; but since this author has relatively little to say about her characters, and we are in fact generally hearing them to the exclusion of hearing *about* them, we could call her method, the dramatic method, a subdivision of the external point of view, foregoing much of the range of authorial analysis which the latter method can afford... But that further refinement of the external method, where the novelist all but disappears and the characters speak as characters in a play, is unique with Miss Compton-Burnett. Inevitably, style is fused with

content, and the insistent objectivity of Miss Compton-Burnett's vision has found its necessary vehicle in the dramatic method. (Burkhart 1965, 33-4)

Both Liddell's use of the term 'stage directions' in his analysis of Compton-Burnett's writing (Liddell 90), and the comments of V.S. Pritchett (1935, 329) suggest strong agreement with Burkhart. In a conversation with Margaret Jourdain in 1945, Compton-Burnett herself, unequivocal in defence of her style, obliquely compares her work with drama:

I do not see why exposition and description are a necessary part of a novel. They are not of a play, and both deal with imaginary human beings and their lives ... in reading novels I am disappointed if a scene is carried through in the voice of the author rather than the voices of the characters. (Cited in Burkhart 1972, 21)

In a later interview with Michael Millgate, Compton-Burnett expands on the comparison, explaining why she has never tried to write a play:

I think a novel gives you more scope. I think I should call my books something between a novel and a play, and I feel the form suits me better than the pure play. It gives me more range and a little more length, and it doesn't subject me to the mechanical restrictions of a play. (Cited in Burkhart 1972, 37)

In drama, the playwright provides not only dialogue but also stage directions for the actors; these may be copious, as in the style of Arnold Wesker, or minimal, as in Julian Mitchell's dramatizations of Compton-Burnett's novels. The actors' interpretation of their roles is further assisted by the director. In Compton-Burnett's novels, most of what happens is delivered to readers in the words of fictional

characters, and the significance and implication of those words are ‘performed’ by an intermediary, the narrative voice, which fulfils the dual role of the playwright’s stage directions and the director. Since the narrative voice is relatively minimal, the space between reader on the one hand and words and actions on the other is all the more open to vagaries of performance. The function of the stage directions in a play, which instruct and explain vocal tone, emphasis, intonation and all aspects of non-verbal communication, is important. Compton-Burnett’s use of a novelistic equivalent must therefore be taken fully into consideration. In the theatre, the audience watches and listens as both action and characters unfold in front of them: in a novel a considerably greater degree of attention is therefore necessary fully to grasp the significance of Compton-Burnett’s ‘stage directions’. The locutions she uses range from simple adverbs to much more complex structures (see Part One, section f)).

The playwright also has at his or her disposal the possibility of a chorus as guide to action and interpretation, a tradition which dates back to Ancient Greek theatre. From Liddell to J. R. Kiernan, reference has been made to the possible influence of her classical education on Compton-Burnett. Commenting on the endings of her novels, Liddell implies a link with Greek tragedy: ‘Before this stage [the close] is reached, something terrible must happen to clear the air – either there is a violent happening or some old and discreditable secret is brought to light – the two classical processes of the Greek tragedians, *peripeteia* or *anagnorisis*. In one or two books, notably in *A House and its Head*, both effects are used’ (Liddell, 35). In his chapter on ‘The Chorus’, there is a brief comparison between Compton-Burnett’s use of the device and that of the Greek tragedians: ‘The tragedy of tyrant and victim is encompassed by witnesses: they are on the whole powerless to help or hinder, as a

Greek chorus is ...' (Liddell, 68). Kiernan notes the frequency of the comparisons of Compton-Burnett with Jane Austen and the scarcely less frequent ones with characters 'who inhabit Greek tragedy' (Kiernan 125). Compton-Burnett herself, in a conversation with Margaret Jourdain, who asks her, 'And how about the Greek Dramatists?' allows of the possibility of the influence of her classical education on her writing: 'The Greek dramatists I read as a girl, as I was classically educated, and read them with the attention to each line necessitated by the state of my scholarship; and it is difficult to say how much soaked in, but I should think very likely something' (Burkhart 72, 24-5). The limits of time and space prevent full exploration of the Greek dramatists' influence on Compton-Burnett's work.

The chorus device can provide structure for the plot, sometimes foreshadowing actions or their effects, and can also offer insights into, and commentary upon, character and plot that are not to be found in the actors' lines. The role of narrator in a novel may thus resemble that of the chorus in drama, and just as in drama, disengaged characters can function in the role of chorus. In Compton-Burnett's work, rather than a specifically identified 'chorus', one or two characters may 'stand in', offering a position outside the action from which they can collude with the audience in the observation of the unfolding action. In *The Art of Ivy Compton-Burnett*, Liddell devotes a chapter to the novelist's use of chorus, categorising them according to function (see Part One, section e)).

It was in 1925, with the publication of *Pastors and Masters*, that Compton-Burnett was to find her authentic voice, although she still did not achieve the successful characterisation and plot structure of her following novels. In 1925 the reading public was accustomed to the classical realist novels of Dickens, George Eliot, Thackeray, and Galsworthy, all writing in what had become a conventional

Victorian realist style, in which description and exposition played a considerable part. Arnold Bennett and Hugh Walpole, whose first novels were published in 1898 and 1909 respectively, followed in the same vein; both were extremely popular, the latter producing several bestsellers during the 1920s and 30s. Some of Compton-Burnett's contemporaries, however, wrote novels which were much less conventional, in the modernist style. Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf were writing successfully using the stream-of-consciousness technique (1925 itself had seen the publication of *Mrs. Dalloway*), and D.H. Lawrence and Radclyffe Hall were about to scandalize the public with *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *The Well of Loneliness* (both published in 1928). James Joyce, who had published *Ulysses* in 1922, was little short of revolutionary in the extent of his literary radicalism. Compton-Burnett's 'unconventional' style also generated considerable debate; unconventional styles such as the modernist are discussed below.

The seven novels considered in this thesis are set, as are all Compton-Burnett's novels, in the late-Victorian or early-Edwardian era; thus she is always 'writing back', about an era which is past. She says herself, in a conversation with Margaret Jourdain,

I do not feel that I have any real or organic knowledge of life later than about 1910. I should not write of later times with enough grasp or confidence. I think this is why many writers tend to write of the past. When an age is ended, you see it as it is... (Cited in Burkhart 72, 27)

What Compton-Burnett saw around her was the profoundly significant socio-historical and cultural events of the decades between the two world wars; they are briefly surveyed in this introduction, using the work of Pugh (2008), and Carnevali

and Strange (2007), as the main sources. The contrasts between the interwar years and the years of the *fin de siècle* are striking (see Part Two, Ch. 1, b); Ch. 2, b), c), d); Chs. 3 and 4). Despite Compton-Burnett's disclaimer as to any knowledge of the era, it was during those twenty years that she refined her art and came to prominence as an important writer. The seven novels under discussion were not only written but also read in this context.

After the cataclysm that was World War I it is no exaggeration to say that the population of Great Britain was traumatised. Nor did these decades allow a return to a more settled life. The euphoria of the immediate post-war era, the 'roaring twenties', saw young women, referred to as 'flappers', smoking and drinking, dancing and wearing short dresses, and above all, in the later years of the twenties, voting. Not only the men returning from war but also these newly- enfranchised women swelled the numbers of voting citizens.

Debate about the aims and conduct of the women's suffrage campaign had been complex and strongly expressed, the Pankhursts being amongst the most prominent campaigners; various approaches were advocated by the different groupings which had come into being (Carnevali and Strange, pp. 99-107).

As early as 1869 suffrage had been granted to women ratepayers for the local government elections; by the 1890s 729,000 women were eligible to vote in the local elections, and by 1900 over 11,000 had become local government officers (Carnevali and Strange, 99); yet women's right to vote in national elections had not been won by the start of the Great War.

Perhaps partly in recognition of the valuable work done by women during the war, the Representation of the People Act was enacted in 1918; male franchise was

also extended to all those who had seen active service. The Act was a major step forward for the suffragists: it saw suffrage extended to female ratepayers over thirty years of age, though some restrictions were put in place, such as the requirement to qualify as local government voters or as wives of local government voters before voting in general elections (105). At a stroke, an electorate of 7.9 million had risen to 21.4 million, with five million more men (who had been given the vote after 1918), and 8.4 million women. Also in 1918, a separate bill was introduced enabling women to stand for election as Members of Parliament. In 1923 Nancy Astor became the first (of eight) women to take her seat in the House of Commons. In 1919, following the passing of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, women became eligible for jury service and service on the Bench.

It was feared that many women, who had not been interested – or who had been prevented by their husbands or fathers from showing interest – in the struggle for enfranchisement, would fail to participate in their new rights and responsibilities. Hence, a number of women's organisations were founded, such as the Women's Institute (founded as early as 1915) and the Townswomen's Guild (1928), which were not closely focused solely on female enfranchisement. Working alongside organisations which had been established specifically to fight for women's suffrage, these societies were successful in applying pressure to the Government on a wide range of issues. Finally, in 1928, equal franchise was granted to women.

The combination of women's franchise and the arrival on scene of the motor car contributed in no small measure to the changing economic situation, to day-to-day life, and to leisure activities during these two decades (see Carnevali and Strange, Ch.8, Pugh, Chs. 11 and 12, and Hattersley, Ch.10, for detail). However, the full advantages of technological developments could not be enjoyed until the post-

war period. The arrival on scene of household appliances eased the burdens of housework of those who could afford them. Women had the right to participate not only in these developments but also in many more areas of employment, as they had done during the Great War, and even in the government of the country. Despite the fact that true equality was still to be won, women's horizons were much wider in the 20s and 30s than those of even Compton-Burnett's strongest women, such as Nance Edgeworth, unable to break free from her father's house until she can go to her husband's. Despite continuing restrictions on women's position in society, Compton-Burnett, in always 'writing back', enables her readers to perceive the contrast between the much greater constraints of the Victorian woman's position and the advances of her own contemporaries. Young women of Compton-Burnett's day—and indeed those of today—might well reflect on the gains made for their sex by their pioneering 'foremothers'.

The growing hedonism of the early twentieth century contributed to the increasing lack of confidence in religion; against a background of pleasure and frivolity, it was soon clear that the country was experiencing not only economic hardship but also a deepening awareness of other latent problems: '... behind the gaiety, exuberance and irresponsibility of post-war social life lurked a pervasive undercurrent of pessimism, the inevitable consequence of the devastating human impact of four years of mass war' (Pugh, 4).

Keith Robbins' work has proved invaluable in providing detailed information on this topic. The High Victorian period had been one of religious stability and certainty, manifest in the number and the triumphalist architecture of the many church buildings, of both Anglican and other denominations, bequeathed to succeeding generations. Nonetheless, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

Christianity had started to be questioned: Marxist and Darwinian thinking had begun to take hold, and the state was gradually assuming responsibility for education, administration, and social welfare. However, '[T]o a limited extent a sense of spiritual crusade rekindled a form of Christian devotion in ... 1914...' (Carnevali and Strange, p.324).

The war was soon to dispel even this 'limited' rekindling, and the troops returning from the Western Front in 1918 found it difficult to reconcile their experiences with the notion of a caring God, as did those on the home front as they welcomed back the damaged men from the trenches:

Charity survived, but faith and hope were both casualties of the First World War and the Churches suffered accordingly. Even some of the clergy, returning from the trenches, found the old idealism hard to sustain.  
(Hattersley, 198)

The proliferation of memorials to the dead erected after the war attested to the centrality of religion in death, but commitment to faith and worship in life were more difficult to measure. The attraction of 'denominations' other than the Church of England continued to make its presence felt, and its predominance was further threatened by internal wrangling over governance and theological debate amongst aging and conservative senior Anglican churchmen, still largely products of the public schools and Oxbridge. Tensions in the Established Church were such that 'keeping the Church together' (Robbins, 13) had been preoccupying the bishops and archbishops since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in the 1920s the need became ever more pressing.

Continuing scientific advances and the dissemination of Freudian and Jungian ideas posed further challenges to church-goers, though the Roman Catholic and Methodist churches retained their congregations. These years saw also the foundation and growth of several peace movements, who joined the Quakers in their opposition to war; the term 'pacifism' entered the dictionaries early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the presence of the bishops and archbishops in the House of Lords was (and still is) an indication that in effect the Church of England was an organ of government, and conversely that it was subject to government interference (Robbins, 103, 107-8). Thus for the bishops and archbishops the age-old questions such as the possibility of a 'just war' and the participation of Christians in warfare were complicated by their position as statesmen as well as churchmen.

There was increasing apprehension in the Churches as to the nature of the society in which they were going to have to survive. In 1929 the Archbishops of Canterbury and York sent a joint pastoral letter to all their clergy expressing their concerns for the future: 'We are [more] enclosed by a material civilisation, great in its achievements, confident in its self-sufficiency, in which no place is found for God or even for the spiritual life of man' (cited in Hattersley, pp. 199, 200). We might question the assertion of the Archbishops as to the greatness of the country's achievements and its confidence in its self-sufficiency: as the 30s wore on statistics emerged which revealed the yawning chasm in living conditions between the rich and the poor: the extent of the lack of housing and of the substandard quality of existing stock, and the consequent effects on health and mortality, proved shocking to many. Some areas were hit harder than others, with the towns which relied on the old staple industries having the oldest and most substandard housing stock (see Pugh, Ch. 5). However, the Church of England, having already started a social

mission in rural areas during the Victorian era and whose ‘heartland’ had always been considered to be the countryside, was prompted to turn its attention to the towns and cities. In 1930 the Convocation of Canterbury passed a unanimous resolution that urged ‘the Government to introduce as soon as possible legislation which will facilitate the abolition of the slums’ (cited in Hattersley, 205). The debate was opened by the Bishop of Southwark, who later produced a report in which he asserted:

We regard the Church’s association with the land as out-of-date. The parson is no longer a landed proprietor or a farmer. Tithe was superseded by the Tithe Rent Charge and the Tithe Act almost completed the process of cutting the Church adrift from the land. In spite of the financial loss suffered, we are glad that a fruitful source of friction between parson and people has been done away. (Cited in Hattersley, 203)

Thus began a period of intense activity on the part of the Church of England. Slum clearance was not completed until after World War Two, and the housing estates built during the Thirties proved later to be faulty in design; nevertheless, during that decade some much improved housing was provided for some of those in greatest need.

The assertion in the Archbishop of Southwark’s report that the association of the Church with the land was regarded as out-of-date clearly resonates with the settings of Compton-Burnett’s novels. The Reverend Oscar Jekyll is from ‘a good family’, and the Reverend Henry Bentley is a ‘younger son’ who inherited his entitlements only on the death of his older brother. All her clergymen are considered to be sufficiently socially acceptable to be admitted to the squire’s circle as a family friend. The encroachment of nonconformist church members into the

squire's circle is indicated by Sir Godfrey Haslam, admittedly a 'pretender' from trade, but also by Sir Andrew Stace, a true squire. One of the internal disputes of the Church is revealed in *Pastors and Masters*, when Miss Lydia reveals her suspicion of 'ritualists' (High Anglicans). It is clearly unthinkable that Compton-Burnett's Victorian rectors, who scarcely concern themselves with most of their rural parishioners, should 'move, live, and have their being' amongst the urban poor.

The 20s and 30s were an era of turbulence and transformation in other areas too. To add to the despondent mood at the end of the war, the country was hit, in 1918, by the so-called Spanish flu, from which Compton-Burnett suffered. The outbreak lasted for eighteen months; the death toll world-wide was estimated at twenty-six million, and in this country 230,000 people lost their lives (Pugh, 6). Delays in demobilisation added to the already widespread dissatisfaction caused by unemployment, and a series of strikes started as early as 1917; in 1918 5.8 million working days were lost, rising to 85 million in 1921 (Pugh,13). The twenties saw a catalogue of disastrous events starting with the Irish Revolution (1920 – 22), which, in view of the Irish immigrant community in this country, resonated strongly in urban communities here. The dissatisfaction and unrest came to a head in 1926, the year of the General Strike, a unique event in British history: Carnevali and Strange describe the twenties as a whole as a decade in which strikes 'reached epic proportions' (p. 45).

Early in 1926 the mine-owners, anxious to see increased prosperity, demanded that the miners work longer hours for less pay. A dispute ensued, as a result of which not only the miners, who numbered over one million, but also 'between one and two million' other workers, struck in solidarity with them (Carnevali and Strange, p.136). The result was chaos: since transport, power, printing and metal workers were

striking in addition to the miners, many workers in unrelated jobs were forced to remain at home. Owing in part to heavy-handed treatment from the Government, after nine days the TUC, who had been in secret talks with the mine owners, called off the General Strike. The miners themselves struggled on until the end of November, by which time many had returned to work, though some were never to do so. No concessions had been made by the mine owners: the miners were forced to accept longer hours for decreased wages.

The General Strike was followed by an international depression triggered by the Wall Street crash in 1929; the resulting 'slump' lasted until 1931 in this country, when, thanks to the domestic market, complete economic collapse was avoided. Any optimism, however, was countered by lack of success in overseas markets, with continued high unemployment, and the increasing threat of another war. The population was decreasing in number; people wanted a better standard of living, and thanks to scientific advances, amongst them birth control, they now had the means of controlling the size of their families. The Government appeared to have very few answers to the escalating problems; their attempts to counter the increasing unemployment rate amounted to not much more than the provision of the 'dole'.

These decades, the 20s but more particularly the 30s, were a time of increasing social unrest and heightened class consciousness. As well as the antagonisms between employed (or unemployed) and employers already indicated, the middle classes were not stable: the wealth and political power of the aristocracy were declining, the landed gentry, as depicted in Compton-Burnett's novels, had already started to lose their land and rents, and the newly-emerging technocratic class, which was rising in both numbers and influence, 'all contributed to an atmosphere of toxic resentment, hostility and snobbery' (Joannou, 2012, p. 104).

Robbins identifies ‘... a pervasive unsettling of convention and a widespread corrosion of certainty at all social levels’ (161). He is referring to religious attitudes, but it can be confidently stated that these attitudes were mutually contributory to the unsettling and corrosion of conventions and certainties in society in general (see Carnevali and Strange (Chs. 4 and 8), Pugh (Chs. 5 and 6), Robbins (Ch. 4), and Hattersley (passim)), as well as Joannou, quoted above).

Another defining event of these decades was the Spanish Civil War, a conflict which had major international repercussions and which might be said to have been a precursor to World War Two. Antony Beevor’s first-rate analysis of the Spanish Civil War, *The Battle for Spain* (2006), provides clear and perceptive explanations of the causes and events of this significant rupture in twentieth century European history, thus bringing to the fore the tensions within Western society.

For many years Spain had experienced increasing national unrest caused by an ever-deepening gulf between wealthy landowners of vast estates on the one hand and desperately poor peasants on the other. The Church sided with the rich; they were also in complete control of secondary education. They believed that universal literacy was a threat to the ruling class, a belief shared by members of their equivalent class in other countries; education for women was believed to be unnecessary. Internal conditions in themselves were sufficient to generate catastrophe; however, Spain’s misfortune was that it ‘had become enmeshed in the international civil war, which started in earnest with the Bolshevik revolution’ (Beevor, xxv). Beevor asserts that to describe the war as one between Left and Right is misleading and simplistic: ‘Two other axes of conflict emerged: state centralism against regional independence and authoritarianism against the freedom of the individual’ (xxv).

The establishment of a Left-wing government in 1936 had been seen by many outside Spain as a victory for working people; the attempted military coup, backed by the Right-wing Nationalists, was therefore perceived not only as an attack on a legally-elected government (the Progressive Popular Front), but also as an assault on the working class. The Nationalists, who saw themselves as guardians of traditional Spanish values, appealed to the Fascist dictatorships of Italy, Portugal, and Germany, where Hitler was now in power. In response to the appeal, Germany and Italy sent troops to assist the rebellion, thus lending an international dimension to a struggle which might otherwise have remained a civil war. British, French, and American democracies failed to go to the aid of the Republicans, but for ideological reasons, intellectual and working class volunteers (including writers), from Britain, France, and the United States started to arrive to support them; the American contingent was sizable and included Black Americans in the first racially integrated unit of the American armed forces. Even more tellingly, anti-fascist exiles from Italy and Germany, including Jewish escapees from concentration camps, began to arrive in Spain; nor were the volunteers all male. Soon their numbers were such that, aided by the Russians, International Brigades were formed (Beevor, 157-8). The British Government was by now committed to its policy of appeasement (see below), and the French government was preoccupied with internal affairs. Thus both countries continued in their lack of support for the Republicans, and on February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1939, both formally recognised the nationalist government under Franco (386). Republican strength was not sufficient to defeat the combined Spanish (Nationalist), German, Italian, and International troops, and at the end of March, 1939, the Nationalist forces, now led by Generalissimo Franco, quelled the Republicans in the battle for Madrid. The war was declared over on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1939 (Arthur, 289), and Franco remained in power until his death in 1975. There was no reconciliation: Franco was

ruthless in imprisoning or liquidating his enemies, assisted by the Church, in a 'reign of terror' of which the repercussions are still felt. Many of the surviving volunteers were later to enlist in the appropriate armies to fight against Fascism. Because of the participation of the Germans and Italians on the side of the Nationalists and the International Brigades on the side of the Republicans, the Spanish Civil War became an international symbol of the struggle between Fascism and democracy.

It is noteworthy that not only men fought on the Republican side. More than one woman was to be found amongst the 'heroes'; the most famous is perhaps Isadora Dolores Ibárruri Gómez, known as *la pasionaria*, famed for her courage, her charisma, and her oratory. On October 28<sup>th</sup> 1938 she officially disbanded the International Brigades as they paraded past her down the Diagonal in Barcelona. The casualty figures for the Brigades given by Beevor are 9,934 dead, 7,686 missing, and 37,541 wounded (366).

During 2015, the seventy-fifth anniversary year of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, MI5 released documents referring to that event, amongst them those from the BBC archive: 'about 4,000' British and Irish citizens went to Spain to fight on the side of the Republicans, 1, 500 more than had previously been estimated, many of them Communists known to MI5. It is not known how many arrived in Spain, or what most of them did there, but it is clear that many never returned. Amongst the volunteers who survived and returned was George Orwell ([www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-13937616](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-13937616)).

Spain's civil war had itself taken place against a background of widespread upheavals. Not only had the Bolshevik revolution resulted in a communist regime, but the Fascist dictators of Germany and Italy were ambitious men, Hitler and

Mussolini respectively. The situation, together with the extreme domestic tensions (see Joannou, 2015, 104) did not bode well for continued peace in Europe.

The seeds of what became known as Britain's policy of appeasement had been sown at the end of World War 1. The League of Nations, established by the Treaty of Versailles to settle international disputes (Pugh, 19), proved to be ineffective: neither Great Britain, France or the USA took action to intervene in various disputatious situations. The USA was perceived by Britain to be at best lukewarm in its implementation of the League's charter, though the British people's attitude to the USA was always complicated by resentment at the increasing American influence on British culture (Pugh, 394). The British government, being more suspicious of France (perceived as too democratic and left-wing), than of Germany and Italy, believed the Communist USSR to be a greater threat than the Fascist regimes (Pugh, 394), whilst France was preoccupied with its internal politics.

By the mid-thirties it was accepted that the League of Nations was 'a broken reed' (Pugh, 440). The British Government believed that 'Germany could be safely left to pursue her interests in central-eastern Europe, Italy in North Africa, and Britain in the Empire, without clashing' (Pugh, 440). The Socialists, on the other hand, 'interpreted the new war as proof of the crisis now facing capitalism in its climactic stage, arguing that the failure of the capitalist economy was generating extreme movements...' (Pugh, 439-40). The 'Jewish Question' added to the unrest, both nationally and internationally.

It was becoming ever clearer that the social and political landscape in Britain was undergoing considerable change; whereas change during the Victorian era had been slow, by the 1920s and particularly the 30s, people were aware that they were living in an age of radical transition. In Britain, Liberalism was declining, to be

replaced by a progressive party, the Labour Party. The new party was elected to power on two occasions, serving in government in 1924 and from 1929 to 1931, under Ramsey Macdonald. Several groupings came into being on the other side of the political divide, most notably the Fascist party of Oswald Mosley. The summer of 1939 saw rallies of groups from both sides of the argument, prominent among them the Fascists (Pugh, 440).

Chamberlain was pursuing his policy of the appeasement of Hitler, first started under Ramsey Macdonald and certainly in existence under Stanley Baldwin, pinning his hopes on negotiation, which he continued even after the declaration of war (Pugh, 443). At this time the mood of many British people may be exemplified by the Queen's open expression of preference for the avoidance of war at all costs, as her brother Fergus had been killed in action in 1915 (394), yet both Socialist/Communist and Fascist camps had their adherents. Like the Royal Family, many members of the aristocracy had family ties in Germany and might almost be said to have admired the Germans, and the chorus of their voices was swelled by pacifists and Quakers; Pugh describes the perhaps surprising feelings of some of the young officers, veterans of WW1: '... the war had politicized many men of his [Siegfried Sassoon's] generation and his class, making rebels and critics of people whose background suggested that they ought to be pillars of the Establishment' (15).

As the ambitions of Hitler and Mussolini became clearer, however, the national mood in Britain began to swing towards acceptance of the inevitability of war; the *News Chronicle* was moved to assert, on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1936: 'Sooner or later the democracies will have to stand' (cited in Pugh, 441). The sufferings of the perceived victims of capitalism engaged the sympathies of the intellectual and creative sectors

of the population. Hattersley quotes Rosamund Lehmann's letter to a friend, written on September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1938, shortly before Chamberlain's capitulation to Hitler's demands:

The shame is so horrible – the disgust and humiliation. Many of us  
 can't feel anything but horror at Neville Chamberlain and his government. ...  
 There is only one hope for the country -- to get rid of Chamberlain and this  
 government. (Hattersley, 387)

The next stage in the disillusion of the British public was provoked, in 1938, by Hitler's demand that the Sudetenland (part of Czechoslovakia) be ceded to Germany; Neville Chamberlain, the Great Appeaser, purported to have negotiated a reasonable outcome, which caused great relief across Britain (he had ceded the Sudetenland to Germany); however, when Hitler, in March, 1939, seized the remainder of Czechoslovakia, British disillusion was complete (Pugh, 442). The Government, after the Munich negotiation, had started to prepare the population for war, so that when war was declared on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1939, the mood was one of resignation.

Janet Montefiore suggests that 'collective memories of the Thirties have taken the form of [two] narratives about, respectively, heroic struggle, [and] unheroic appeasement ... [both] invoked to illuminate (and to obscure) political issues, and [both] influencing literary historians ...' (Joannou, 1999, 16). The second, though prominent in history, did not find many supporters amongst the intellectual élite, amongst whom modernist writers (see below) may be classed. She goes on to elaborate: 'Inaugurated by the Wall St. crash in October 1929, and ending with

Hitler's invasion of Poland, those ten years of mass poverty, protest and imminent war have never stopped mattering in British political culture' (16).

It was during the Thirties that women Modernist writers became politically involved in one aspect of Montefiore's first narrative, the workers' fight against Fascism; one such was Sylvia Townsend Warner, an active Communist during the earlier part of her career, who drove a Red Cross ambulance during the Spanish Civil War. Other women writing during the 20s and 30s included Naomi Mitchison, Rebecca West, Dorothy Richardson, Kathryn Mansfield, Elizabeth Bowen, Jean Rhys, Vera Brittain, and Winifred Holtby, not all of them modernist but all engaged with contemporary issues. Some also took part in the debates about literary experimentation, including May Sinclair, Dorothy Richardson, and Virginia Woolf.

During 'those ten years' (and the previous ten) Compton-Burnett lived in her flat, with her companion Margaret Jourdain, entertaining, and being entertained by, Margaret's and her own friends, some of whom were writers. She lived in a much smaller property than she had been used to, and was attended by only one servant, possibly with the odd appliance or two to help her. Though she herself was not of the landed classes, her life during these years might well have reflected the lives of some of the daughters and granddaughters of the upper middle class families about whom she wrote. She was probably better educated than most of these 'young ladies' would have been, and because of that, she would be better informed than they would have been: informed about the events, attitudes, movements, in the domestic, national, and international spheres, which had so transformed English life and the British nation. Yet, having disclaimed any understanding of things since 1910 (see above, pp. 8,9), she determinedly continued to set her novels at the *fin de siècle*, remaining aloof

from direct involvement in political issues of the day, despite their ‘mattering’; nor did she participate in print in debates about literature.

The years of national and international political and social upheaval described above saw equally radical cultural changes. Modernism first manifested itself in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction to the far-reaching changes beginning to take place across Western society. These changes generated new thinking in various forms of culture and in various countries.

Literary Modernism revealed its rebellion against Victorian authority and positivism in a mistrust of traditional modes of writing. Both male and female writers forcefully expressed their resistance to literary convention. Amongst those who were influential in the early development of the movement were T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Both demanded constant ‘newness’, Eliot writing, ‘to conform merely [to previous work] would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art’ (cited in Linett, 1). Pound’s mantra to ‘make it new’ came to sum up the rejection of the positive and optimistic tenor of much Victorian writing, a rejection which was intensified as the effects of World War I became apparent.

Taking up Pound’s mantra, female writers as well as male sought to find new modes of representation. Women, encouraged by their participation in local government and in the workplace during the war, and empowered by the Act of 1918 (see above), joined their male counterparts in rebelling against the omniscient narrator and the linear narrative, and in employing innovative techniques such as the unreliable narrator, multiple points of view, interior monologue, and ‘stream of consciousness’, a term applied by May Sinclair, an influential figure in the promotion of Modernism, with reference to the writing of Dorothy Richardson.

During the decade of World War 1 some writers, including Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf in this country and early Modernist American women such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman(1860 - 1935), had already been engaged in producing work ‘marked by the use of particular formal practices, including a move away from the authority and coherence of narrative commentary to decentred narrative...’, preferring ‘an emphasis on the fluidity and discontinuity of identity ... disruptions to chronology; and a vigorous engagement of the reader in the difficulties of interpretation’ (Trodd, 56).

As the Twenties passed Modernist interest in political issues became more apparent, but several noted Modernists continued to concentrate their attention on experimental work during the Thirties and beyond; thus two strands (experimentation in form and concern with socio-political issues) co-existed.

There has been some argument as to when the Modernist movement ended: it has been claimed by Terry Eagleton that: ‘By the 1930s, with Auden and Orwell, realism was firmly back in the saddle’ (*Walter Benjamin*, 95). However, according to Jean Radford (1999, 33) Eagleton fails to take women modernist novels fully into account. Joannou states, ‘Like men, women were polarized in specific ways by the historical events of the 1930s and are situated at different points in the social, political, and aesthetic spectrum’ (Joannou, 1999, 8). Some of the women novelists of the 1930s, ‘a decade in which passions about the conduct of public affairs ran extraordinarily high’ (ibid.), were much more concerned with socio-political and historical issues than with literary experimentation. However, whereas many women writers of the era, including Compton-Burnett, had women friends who were writers, unlike men they did not identify themselves as belonging to a ‘movement’, with the support and shared agenda implied by the term. The male Modernists, on the other

hand, tended to continue their exclusion of women writers from their consideration, seeing them as ‘private creatures, inhabitants of the kitchen or back yards if poor or, if wealthy, the bedroom or at best the department store’ (Montefiore, 23). This view of women’s place as the private sphere and men’s as the public sphere was still widespread.

Bonnie Kime Scott cites Woolf, reflecting on the work of her male contemporaries, H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy, as illustrating the shortcomings of the typical contemporary novel: these writers ‘no longer serve the contemporary mind. Life and spirit evade their “materialist” approach of amassing solid details in tight constructions’ (Scott, 22). Woolf goes on to stipulate what is ‘the proper stuff of fiction’: it is no longer to be found in expected places; rather, it is in ‘the moment of importance’ that Modernists find what they should be writing about (ibid.).

In addition to the formal experimentation demanded by male Modernists, Virginia Woolf, with the publication of *Orlando* in 1928, called for the rejection of a sex/gender-based focus in the writing of novels, demanding rather what she called an androgynous approach, which today would be called transgenderism or gender fluidity (see Part Two, Chapter 3, c); Chapter 4, f)). She continued:

It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly... and it is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death. It ceases to be fertilized. (Linett, 2)

In making this call, Woolf was in effect requiring the exploration of women’s hearts, minds, bodies and lives. To do this the writer must transcend sex and develop an

androgynous consciousness from which to write. For some women novelists, including Woolf herself, this struggle to find new forms of expression for women's experience remained their principal focus.

### **Compton-Burnett and the socio-political context**

Kristin Bluemel, in the Appendix to her collection, proposes Compton-Burnett as a possible intermodernist. Bluemel emphasises in her introduction T. S. Eliot's insistence that the business of the Modernist poet is not his responsibility to 'people' but to his language, whereas the prime responsibility of the intermodernist is precisely to 'people'. She makes clear that intermodernism may be regarded as both a style and a period, and cites the writings of the wartime pilot Richard Hillary to explain the typical concerns of the intermodernist: 'work (of pilots, nurses and surgeons), of community (of students, pilots and patients), of war (the Battle of Britain, the Blitz) and of documents (of fictionalised memoir)' (Bluemel, 8). It is acknowledged here that Compton-Burnett's focus does not coincide with that of Eliot. However, neither can she be said to focus on 'people' in the sense that Bluemel (and Hillary) use the word; her attention is directed towards specific families of a certain class, whom she uses as exemplars of the *malaise* affecting that class during the late-Victorian and early-Edwardian period.

Lynne Hapgood and Nancy Paxton move away from the expanding definitions of modernisms during the 1990s which seek to recover 'lost' writers and to re-evaluate relationships between high and low modernism and between publishers and new readers. Rather, they seek 'to conceptualize the relationship between modernism and its early twentieth century *doppelgänger*, realism' (Hapgood and Paxton, vii). Their aim is to do this by demonstrating how the two techniques (modernism and realism) may quite naturally co-exist and interact.

There has been some uncertainty about the categorisation of Compton-Burnett as a modernist; it is therefore beneficial to consider her work from the point of view of Hapgood and Paxton's endeavour, expressed above. They contend that '... the baton which the early twentieth century realists carried forward from the Victorian era ... is not realism itself but the profound concern and engagement in social change which it so effectively embodies' (ibid., vii, viii). It is therefore justifiable to leave aside any attempt to define 'realism' and concentrate our attention on this statement. Compton-Burnett's pitiless depiction of certain upper middle class families, coupled with the insights afforded by her contemporary context, demonstrate her awareness of the considerable changes which have been, and still are, taking place in English society (see discussions below).

Hapgood and Paxton assert that their objective is 'not to deny the necessarily iconoclastic mood of those modernist writers who were struggling to distance themselves from traditional literary forms ... but rather to lay claim to the distinctive contribution of realist writers to that struggle and to argue that the nature of that struggle is as much characterised by continuities as by dislocation' (ibid.22). Perhaps it is the apparent 'dislocation' between the *fin de siècle* and the twenties and thirties which prevents Hapgood and Paxton from a consideration of Compton-Burnett.

Compton-Burnett may not have involved herself in the important social and political issues of the day, as did many Modernists, but that is not to say that her writings show no sign of Modernist influence and do not respond to the political context of the times of their composition. 'Writing back', Compton-Burnett discerned the early symptoms of the decay which she perceived in the society around her during the Twenties and Thirties; the Church (usually in the figure of the local clergyman), losing the respect of its members, and with good reason (*Pastors and*

*Masters, Brothers and Sisters, Daughters and Sons, Men and Wives, A House and its Head*); the necessity for sons, and sometimes their fathers, to earn a living (*Brothers and Sisters, Daughters and Sons, Men and Wives, A Family and a Fortune*); the encroachment of women into the male domain (*Daughters and Sons, Brothers and Sisters*); the already existing *déclassement* (*A House and its Head, Men and Wives*); the abandonment of the family home (*Brothers and Sisters*); homosexuality, lesbianism (suggested in several novels and overt in more than one (*Brothers and Sisters, More Women than Men*)); incest (suggested and overt in *Brothers and Sisters*); the rupture of the patriarchy (*Brothers and Sisters*); various crimes including matricide (*Men and Wives*), murder by proxy (*A House and its Head*), and murder by stealth (*More Women than Men*); and the pervasive poverty of the family and dilapidation of the property. Thus, the contemporary historical context and its contrasts with the late Victorian era are clearly present in Compton-Burnett's novels, although not foregrounded because of her focus on the earlier period of history.

Compton-Burnett's claim of a lack of 'grasp' of life after 1910 and her claim to be able to see the pre-war age 'as it is' is understandable. However, she continued to live after 1910. Inevitably, therefore, she had the hindsight afforded by having lived through those intervening years when she wrote about the earlier period. Thus a distance is created between the world she presents in her novels and the world in which she lives. This distance opens the door to irony: those elements of decay in Victorian-Edwardian society of which she discerns the beginnings, and which she was clearly intent on depicting, have progressed: what was already evident to Compton-Burnett's contemporaries is even clearer to today's readers, who also benefit from hindsight. Spurling expresses the idea like this:

Ivy's view of the pre-1914 world... freed her to write about what seemed then and still seem some of the most threatening issues of the time. Almost from the start Ivy used the domestic novel, distanced by her ostensibly Victorian style and setting, to explore atrocity, violence, the corruption of language and the totalitarian abuse of power. (Spurling x-xi)

### **Compton-Burnett and the stylistic context**

Although Compton-Burnett did not participate in debates about current stylistic developments, her own diction was unconventional. The aspect of her work which has always caused most comment is her reliance on dialogue. Despite the significant presence of the narrative voice, the extent of the dialogue in Compton-Burnett's novels is innovatory, as are the variety and subtlety of her narratological strategies in dealing with it (see Part One, sections b), c), d), e), and f); they bear consideration as modernist.

In analysing the diction of Felix Bacon (*More Women than Men*), R.F. Kiernan perceptively invokes Nathalie Sarraute's notion of conversation and sub-conversation; he demonstrates the possible 'flow of thought' through Felix's mind, revealing moments at which Felix's 'thoughts' may in fact be uttered, and thus hinting at the possibility of stream-of-consciousness (Kiernan, pp. 130 – 33; see Part One, section d)).

Burkhart too, in his exploration of Compton-Burnett's method, calls on conversation and sub-conversation; Nathalie Sarraute, the noted proponent of the

*nouveau roman*, and an admirer of Compton-Burnett, was concerned, like many of her contemporaries, with ‘the flow of thought through a character’s mind’ (Leech and Short 2007, 270; see Part Two, preamble). In her influential essay on the contemporary novel, titled ‘*Conversation and Sub-Conversation*’ (Sarraute 97-120), she reflects on the increased importance of dialogue at the expense of action in the modern novel, and the difficulty of incorporating such dialogue within the forms imposed by the traditional linear novel, since, she suggests, the dialogue in the modern novel is different in kind as well as in extent from that of the traditional novel:

For it is above all the outward continuation of subterranean movements which the author – and with him the reader – must make at the same time as the character, from the moment they form until the moment when, having been forced to the surface by their increasing intensity, to reach the other person and protect themselves from exterior dangers, they cloak themselves in the protective capsules of words. (ibid.109)

Sarraute accepts that Compton-Burnett presents speech in a traditional manner:

... holding herself aloof ... from her characters, and limiting herself as a rule ... to simply reproducing their words and quietly informing the reader, without trying to vary her formulas, by means of the monotonous ‘said X’, ‘said Y’. (ibid. 118)

However, like Burkhart (and Kiernan), she believes that Compton-Burnett situates her dialogue at the boundary between conversation and sub-conversation, allowing what might have been explored by means of psychological analysis or stream-of-

consciousness to make its presence felt in the dialogue itself, thus exposing the tension between conversation and sub-conversation.

In labelling Compton-Burnett's diction the 'dramatic method', Burkhart echoes Sarraute:

The dialogue, which would be merely the outcome or, at times, one of the phases of these dramas, would then, quite naturally, free itself of the conventions and restraints that were made indispensable by the methods of the traditional novel. And thus, imperceptibly, through a change of rhythm or form, which would espouse and at the same time accentuate his own sensation, the reader would become aware that the action has moved from inside to outside. (Sarraute 117)

Thus, Burkhart, Kiernan, and Sarraute all appear to agree that Compton-Burnett's narrative style approaches the stream-of-consciousness technique and might well be categorized as modernist. However, in view of Compton-Burnett's analytical engagement with historical perspective (see above), alongside this innovative diction, Compton-Burnett may be described rather as a novelist in whom the two techniques (of realism and modernism) co-exist (see above, p. 28) to produce her unique voice.

In a collection entitled *British Fiction after Modernism*, and thus appearing to move on from Modernism, Sarah Crangle makes clear her acceptance of the critical views of Compton-Burnett as modernist before embarking on her suggestion of risibility as a starting point for an exploration of some of Compton-Burnett's work.

Crangle cites Michael Millgate's interview with Compton-Burnett in saying that 'her characters' more outrageous statements are often presumed to be renderings of aspects of the unconscious'. She continues, 'She [Compton-Burnett] is thus

perceived as having taken stream-of-consciousness narrative to newer and deeper levels' (Crangle, 102), before concluding her point: 'For her critics, Compton-Burnett is inseparable from the thinking that engendered so much modernist literary innovation' (ibid. 103).

Crangle contends that 'Laughter functions as an index of character relations, and as a fundamental accompaniment to the stichomythic banter comprising the vast majority of what she [Compton-Burnett] calls her 'dialogue' novels (Crangle, 99). She situates her contention alongside the work on 'self, others and laughter' of Darwin and Freud in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century (Crangle, 101).

Crangle's analyses of the laughter of child characters in *Pastors and Masters*, *Brothers and Sisters*, and *Daughters and Sons* are penetrating (Robin, in the second of these novels, though adult, is analysed in relation to his mother). She clearly demonstrates the validity of her contention, thus suggesting further investigation of this aspect of Compton-Burnett's work, though limits of time preclude the possibility on this occasion.

A further indication of the extent to which Compton-Burnett requires the full attention of the reader in the problems of interpretation is the occasional hiatus in the sequence of events, ranging from the micro-level of individual exchanges of dialogue, of which there are several examples in the first forty pages of *A House and its Head*, to the macro-level of plot, of which there is one very clear example in the same novel. In the first case, one example will suffice: Beatrice, one of the spinsters, has just visited the Edgeworth household to deliver 'the simple message of Christmas' (*A House and its Head*, 29). Bethia has been summoned to show Beatrice to the door; there is a brief conversation between Beatrice and Bethia, consisting of six utterances interrupted by two narrative interpolations, ending with Bethia's

saying 'Goodbye, Miss'. The following line reads, "'The impertinent woman!" Duncan was saying' (p.31). There has been no indication that Bethia has arrived and entered the room, that Beatrice has parted from the family or left the room and crossed the hall, no indication that the front door has been reached and opened. Nor has it been signalled that Duncan was uttering his exclamation while the conversation between Beatrice and Bethia was taking place. Readers are momentarily taken aback until the implication of the tense (was saying) strikes home.

The example of the hiatus in terms of plot in the same novel lasts from p.143 to p.208, when Gretchen Jekyll reveals the truth. Richard, the son of Grant and Duncan's second wife Alison, is found dead in bed: the gas tap is on, and the windows closed. Despite Cassie's expressed doubts in view of Richard's age (he is between two and three years old), the supposition that the child is responsible for his own death appears to be accepted: he has got up in the night, gone to where the gas tap is hidden behind a cupboard and turned it on, and then closed the window despite the difficulty of the latch, before going back to bed. Richard's paternity, the underlying reason for his murder, has been a secret since p.143. Only once in the seventy-five pages between the realisation of the need for secrecy and Gretchen's revelation of the murderer has there been any reference to the passage of time: on p.151 the time elapsed since Ellen's death is mentioned by Nance as three years. Readers find it difficult to work out the time-line and thus remain confused as to the possibility or otherwise of the family's supposition and the alternative.

There can be no doubt that readers of Compton-Burnett must pay close attention in order to follow her intricacies of plot and diction. Mezei applies to other female writers the need to 'decode subversive, evasive, or perplexing narrative strategies' (Mezei, 1996, p.1); she might equally have applied such terms to

Compton-Burnett. Her work fulfils Roland Barthes' preference, that the text should be not merely '*readerly*', but '*writerly*' (S/Z, p.4). In reflecting on the current state of the novel Barthes finds that its value is 'what can be written (rewritten) today: the *writerly*'. He explains: 'the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text'. As the 'opposite' of the writerly text, he posits 'its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the *readerly*' (Barthes, p.4).

Compton-Burnett's narratives are linear, and the narrator is extradiegetic. The focus is on the family throughout, the narrator occupying a neuter and neutral position on the side-lines, watching and listening with wry irony. There are no flashes forward or back, and no ellipses; there are, however, a number of time-lapses, which function to engage the attention of the reader in deciphering the precise sequence of events (see above). Only rarely does s/he step forward to offer compassion: there are two such occasions with regard to the spinsters in *A House and its Head* (see Part Two, Ch. 4, v)); a third example occurs as the Ponsonby family (*Daughters and Sons*) waits for news of Hetta (see Part Two, Ch.4, v). There are equally rare changes of focalization, for example, as Matty Seaton realises her friend's thoughts (*A Family and a Fortune*) (see Part One, section d)), and again in *Daughters and Sons*, when Hetta comes to a realisation of the events which have taken place in the family (see Part One, section b)).

A consideration of Compton-Burnett's novels in the context of Modernism reveals that in terms of narratology she is innovative (see Part One, b), c), d), e), f)); she clearly holds the narrator at arm's length, disrupts chronology, and requires readers to work hard to decipher who is speaking and what is happening. With regard to feminist narratology, however, there is little evidence in these seven novels (other

than the few cited above) to support a claim of experimentation in that area. As to feminism itself, she does not immerse herself in the rhetoric or the style of any of her fellow women novelists. Yet the depiction of some of her characters clearly indicates her awareness of the existence of despotic women, clever, talented women, of strong women and lesbian women; of women who cannot survive the demands imposed on them by the notion of the perfect wife; and of cruel, tyrannical, sycophantic, and what were considered in those days to be ‘deviant’ men; the effect of her portrayals is unquestionably subversive. Her position with regard to both Modernism and feminism, therefore, may be said to be – characteristically – detached.

In addition to its critical link to drama first put forward by Burkhart (see p. 5 above), another approach to Compton-Burnett’s work has been prominent in more recent years. In 1964 Susan Sontag published her influential ‘*Notes on “Camp”*’, and in *Note 4* (of 58) she itemises the novels of Ronald Firbank and Ivy Compton-Burnett as ‘part of the canon of camp’ (cited in Cleto, 54). Not surprisingly in view of the brevity of the *Notes*, Sontag provides no justification for the inclusion of any of the items. *Note 3*, however, refers to ‘...movies, clothes, furniture, popular songs, novels, people, buildings....’; it is reasonable therefore to assume that the items listed in *Note 4* are intended to exemplify the claim made in *Note 3*:

Not only is there a Camp vision, a Camp way of looking at things. Camp is as well a quality discoverable in objects and the behaviour of persons. There are ‘campy’ movies, clothes, furniture, etc. ... This distinction is important. True, the Camp eye has the power to transform experience. But not everything can be seen as Camp. It’s not *all* in the eye of the beholder. (Ibid.)

The irony which is inherent in Camp suggests an additional standpoint from which to apprehend the subtlety of Compton-Burnett’s narrative voice. In recent years three

commentators have followed Sontag in applying the term ‘camp’ to the work of Ivy Compton-Burnett: Nicola Humble and Sos Eltis, both writing in 2008, and R.F. Kiernan (1990). In her paper, ‘Queer Pleasures of Reading: Camp and the Middlebrow’, Humble lists the novelist amongst those to whom she applies the term camp. Humble focuses first on *Note 33*:

What camp taste responds to is “instant character” and, conversely, what it is not stirred by is the sense of the development of character. Character is understood as a state of continual incandescence – a person being one, very intense thing. This attitude toward character is a key element of the theatricalization of experience embodied in the camp sensibility. Wherever there is development of character, camp is reduced. (Humble 2008, 2)

It is in relation to this note that Humble lists ‘the weirdly static world of Ivy Compton-Burnett’ (Humble 2008, 2) as an example of camp in the novel. Unfortunately, Compton-Burnett is not amongst the novelists she goes on to discuss.

Kiernan notes the widely varying critiques of Compton-Burnett by such figures as Raymond Mortimer, Edward Sackville-West, Burkhart, and Anthony Powell, who have suggested links between Compton-Burnett and Cézanne, Picasso, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter respectively. He poses a tongue-in-cheek question: ‘.... can it be possible that Compton-Burnett is also a camp humorist?’ (Kiernan 126), a question which he does not definitively answer. Identifying ‘modern inconsequentialness’ (sic.) as a feature of Compton-Burnett’s novels and stating that ‘the most shocking deployment [of this] is in her dialogue’ (Kiernan, 129), Kiernan examines in depth and with acuity Sarraute’s notion of conversation and sub-conversation (see above), but does not succeed in relating it to camp.

Eltis, taking Sontag's *Notes* as the basis for her discussion of Noel Coward, Harold Pinter and Ivy Compton-Burnett, asserts that '[t]here is an undeniable campness running through Compton-Burnett's novels' (Eltis, 226), before identifying two aspects of Compton-Burnett's work as of prime importance in a consideration of camp in her novels: being-as-playing-a-role (Sontag's *Note 10*), and the prioritization of style over content (Sontag's *Note 2*). In this latter regard, she agrees with Kiernan as to the inappropriate flippancy of much of the dialogue. She writes, 'Aware ... that flippancy is a highly effective form of defence, Compton-Burnett's characters repeatedly respond to the enormity of events with an apparent carelessness, evading and disarming explicit moral judgement' (Eltis, 226). To illustrate, she quotes a brief extract from *Brothers and Sisters*, in which the Stace siblings have just discovered that their parents were half-siblings, and are trying to explain the situation to their friends whilst shielding their possible shame by means of humour:

"You simply have to tell us who your other grandfather was."

"Simply that", said Dinah. "It is too simple. The lack of variety is the trouble."

They all began to laugh. (*Brothers and Sisters* 218)

The Drydens do not grasp the significance of what they are being told, and the Staces must struggle on in their attempt to reveal the full truth. During the difficult conversation, the narrator tells readers, 'His [Andrew's] voice shook as if for several reasons' (ibid. 218). Readers are free to infer these, but the most obvious is that Andrew is aware of the shame attached to incest and fearful of the impact the news will have on their fiancés. His (and his siblings') attempt at light-heartedness is a defensive mask. Despite her acknowledgement that 'flippancy is a highly effective

form of defence' (see above, Eltis 226), in writing of 'moral templates' Eltis does not appear to accept the efficacy of such flippancy, as the Staces strive to protect themselves against the shame of their parentage. Felix Bacon sums up, flippantly as usual, what is the underlying purpose of his own, and perhaps of others', frequent flippancy when Gabriel reproaches him for his mood of 'complete unseemliness' in the face of his father's death, to which Felix responds: 'Surely you know what may be covered by a jesting exterior. You speak as if I had not just told you what is covered by mine' (*More Women than Men*, 169).

The tone of the speakers in the dialogue quoted above is incongruous, provoked by their position of insecurity. Such 'flippancy' is found throughout the speech of certain camp characters, such as Felix Bacon, Julian Wake, Dudley Gaveston, and Charity Marcon, all of whom are vulnerable, as will emerge in discussion of these characters (see Chs. 3c), 4 f)). Whilst it is true that the claim as to the 'campness' of some characters is fair, neither Kiernan nor Eltis identifies the element of camp in any of the four characters above who are the most egregiously camp in the novels. Instead, Kiernan and Eltis offer analyses of Sophia Stace (Eltis), and Justine Gaveston and Duncan Edgeworth (Kiernan), as camp characters. Justine Gaveston is fussy and on occasion overbearing, but neither of these two characteristics is extreme, and the laughter Justine causes in her family and in the reader is affectionate. Whilst the first and the third of these characters are extreme in their behaviour and fully exemplify the notion expressed in *Note 10*, there is no trace of what must surely be considered an essential element of camp: there is no frivolity, no enjoyment, nothing 'playful, anti-serious' (*Note 41*). While it is true that the element of excess is a necessary condition of camp, it is not a sufficient condition. The other essential is fun: all camp is excessive, but not all that is excessive is camp.

Kiernan and Eltis are in agreement also with regard to plots, Kiernan applying to them the phrases ‘Victorian cliché’ and ‘overripe Victoriana’ (Kiernan 128), whilst Eltis states that ‘Compton-Burnett’s novels centre repeatedly on the late Victorian and Edwardian family as a site of power-struggles, covert aggression, and manipulation’ (Eltis, 226). The comparison of Compton-Burnett’s plots to those of Victorian novelists is valid. Kiernan and Eltis believe Compton-Burnett’s plots to be camp; the implication is, therefore, that they believe that the plots of Victorian novels are also camp. This may be the case, but with regard to Compton-Burnett’s work at least, both of these commentators are clearly aware of the depths beneath the melodrama. Eltis uses terms such as ‘power-struggles’, ‘covert aggression’, ‘manipulation’ (see above), and quotes Compton-Burnett’s answer to one of John Bowen’s questions: ‘I write of power being destructive and parents had absolute power over children in those days’ (Eltis 126). Kiernan’s chapter on her work is entitled ‘The Palette Darkened’, and he writes of the ‘psychopathic dimension of family life’ and the ‘dark world of Freudian understanding’ (Kiernan 144). The excessive ‘melodrama’ of the plots may provoke momentary laughter, but it is soon stifled by the realisation of the ‘terrible acts of passion’ (Kiernan 125) to be found in the novels. The claim as to the camp quality of Compton-Burnett’s plots is not therefore convincing.

Certainly some of Compton-Burnett’s characters are camp, notably those who are for some reason vulnerable, and their speech is an indicator of their campiness. Her plots may appear superficially light-hearted but they reveal themselves as too grim to be camp. Therefore, whilst there is an element of camp in Compton-Burnett’s novels, it does not warrant the emphasis which it has been accorded,

especially when such a focus obscures the variety of characters featured in the novels and implies the ‘inconsequentialness’ (sic.) of Compton-Burnett’s work as a whole.

The critical resort to the notion of camp emerges from the recognition that what sets Compton-Burnett’s work apart is its attitude and the way in which the narratives are told. Point of view may be defined as the perspective from which the story is told, the narrator’s position in relation to the narrative. In Compton-Burnett’s case, the narrator is always the third person. Amongst the critics and commentators who have explored the detachment of the narratorial voice in Compton-Burnett’s novels, Kathy Justice Gentile describes Compton-Burnett’s narratorial position as an intensification of ‘Austen’s detached ironic stance’ (19); she speaks of the novels’ ‘unobtrusive, non-judgmental narrative voice...’ (21). Lisa Colletta writes ‘...Compton-Burnett chose to investigate these subjects [what constitutes the self and how it can be protected] from a rigorously objective perspective’ (59).

Frequently, Compton-Burnett does not even use what Sarraute has referred to as ‘monotonous’ attributions (see above). However, when she does report speech, it is usually in the form ‘said’. Varied attributions such as ‘asked’, ‘answered’, ‘replied’, ‘shouted’ ‘whispered’, etc. are very rarely to be found. Moreover, the significance of the content of the frequent ‘extensions’ to the reporting verb, separated from the utterance itself, may not always be fully appreciated by readers, but perceived rather as background information. Thus, the emphasis by Compton-Burnett’s critics and commentators on the objectivity of the narratorial standpoint, created by the preponderance of her dialogue with its minimal attributions and on the lack of narration and of descriptive context, may appear at first sight to be justified.

The relation between narrator and what is being narrated is by no means conventional. The result of Compton-Burnett's reliance on dialogue is access for the reader to action unimpeded by narrative comment or descriptive context. This aspect of her work has been the focus of much debate. Compton-Burnett's narrator seeks to position him/herself outside the narrative and detached from it, thus appearing to allow readers themselves, to a greater extent than usual, to observe character and action, to hear dialogue, and to draw inferences with regard to thoughts. Such a self-effacing narrator assumes a considerable degree of congruence, in terms of knowledge of history, culture, and values, between him/herself and readers; thus this mode of story-telling relies on the reader to draw inferences from their shared experience and understanding of ironic and evaluative references and of generic statements.

A narrator who seeks to maintain a distanced point of view always places him/herself in a position in which collusion with the reader is not only possible but necessary if the narration is to be successful. The narrator relies on Wayne Booth's 'secret communion' (Booth 300) to convey to readers the contrast between the values and opinions of two different points of view, his or her own and those of the fictional characters; this collusion between narrator and reader, fostered by generic terms and statements and by references to common experience, produces the divergence which lies at the very heart of irony.

Amongst the critics and commentators who have explored the detachment of the narratorial voice in Compton-Burnett's novels, Kathy Justice Gentile describes Compton-Burnett's narratorial position as 'unobtrusive, non-judgmental narrative voice...' (21). By the means indicated above, the narrator communicates secretly with the reader; s/he communicates *about* the characters and the action: the distance

between the communicators on the one hand, in effect producing a collusion between observers, and the subject of their communication on the other, opens the door wide to the possibility of seeing and hearing irony in what the narrative voice reports.

This thesis will seek to refute the critiques of Compton-Burnett as to the inefficacy of her descriptions of character and setting and of the lack of psychological analysis. It will demonstrate that the generic references to, and evaluative implications of, the setting, the characters and their way of life enable readers to perceive the general within the specific whilst at the same time revealing narratorial attitudes; thus Tristram's suggestion of at best snobbery and at worst arrogance ('perverse alienation' (27)) on Compton-Burnett's part will be seen to be unjustified. In each of the novels under consideration, the 'formula' identified by Mantel will be tested and its applicability examined. The thesis will explore Compton-Burnett's mode of speech and thought presentation: the added impact of reporting verbs other than 'said', in particular those involving *sotto voce* locutions, which provide insight and commentary whilst appearing to be barely audible. The functioning of the novels' theatrical devices will also be explored. Further, the contribution of the extended attributions and of the evaluative and implicative vocabulary of the narrative interpolations and the brief descriptions will be discussed. These considerations of aspects of her diction will reveal that frequently, although subtly, she is at pains to subvert her apparent detachment and hence to make the narrative position clear: in these seven novels religion, particularly in the form of the established church, is satirised; 'educators' and writers are ironised; the notion of the sanctity of the family is undermined; gender stereotypes are subverted; and the Victorian ideal of the upper middle class as the bedrock of society is challenged. Thus it will be demonstrated that the narrative voice is not as detached

as has been thought, but rather works powerfully to achieve the 'secret communion' between writer and reader, which in turn supports, and is supported by, the multiple ironies of the fiction.

## **Part One: Diction**

It has been established that Compton-Burnett's narrators have usually been considered detached; in this regard an echo of the modernist attempts to dispense with the omniscient narrator makes itself heard. In this section I am going to discuss the narrative diction in the selected novels: the presentation of character and settings, the narrative interpolations, the extended attributions, and the presentation of speech and thought, which may invite the reader to draw inferences about character and plot in a way that illustrates that the narrator is far from disinterested. Readers may also reflect on Compton-Burnett's narrative techniques.

Leech and Short (2007) is followed for treatment of stylistic elements; it is acknowledged that their uses of stylistic terminology are not universally accepted and have been challenged in some quarters. Readers are advised to cross-reference all Leech and Short references to Wales, 2014.

### **a) Presentation of character and setting**

The varying opinions of Compton-Burnett's critics with regard to her presentation of settings and characters have already been made clear; it is worthwhile to examine some of the novelist's relatively brief descriptive passages in order to determine to what extent readers are provided with sufficient 'sense data' and insight to enable them to achieve a full appreciation of Compton-Burnett's characters and their

environment. Sarraute has a different view of Compton-Burnett's introductory paragraphs; nothing, she says, could be 'more outmoded than the descriptions of their physical appearance by which she introduces them' (Sarraute 118).

The following paragraph appears on the first page of *A House and its Head*, and introduces Duncan Edgeworth, the tyrannical paterfamilias, and his downtrodden wife, Ellen.

Duncan Edgeworth was a man of medium height and build, appearing both to others and himself to be tall. He had narrow, grey eyes, stiff, grey hair and beard, a solid, aquiline face, young for his sixty-six years, and a stiff, imperious bearing. His wife was a small, spare, sallow woman, a few years younger, with large, kind, prominent eyes, a long, thin, questioning nose, and a harried, innocent, somehow fulfilled expression. (5)

Readers learn immediately that there is nothing physically remarkable about Duncan – he is 'medium' in height and build. However, this fact is at once counteracted by the ensuing phrase: what is remarkable, it is suggested, is his self-image and the fact that it appears to coincide with the opinion others have of him. The repetition of the value-laden adjectives 'stiff' and 'grey' emphasises the qualities they imply, of inflexibility in the first case and coldness in the second; the reference to the narrowness of his eyes implies the possibility of a narrow outlook and a suspicious nature; further, his face speaks of a certain confidence and distinction ('solidity' and 'aquiline', both positively value-laden). His apparent youthfulness seems to indicate a degree of comfort and a lack of anxiety, while the powerful adjective 'imperious', applied as it is to 'bearing', a noun embodying inner qualities as well as physical characteristics, reinforces the impression already created. Duncan Edgeworth looks

at first sight like a man we might see anywhere, but readers soon discover how apposite are the narrator's implications: he has a high opinion of himself, which is shared by others; he is a man of a certain position in society; and, significantly, he is an unsympathetic character, appearing to be autocratic and intractable. The author's tone is established at the start: Duncan's high opinion of himself and the respect with which he is regarded by his neighbours is in ironic contrast to his presentation to the reader as 'medium' in more than one respect, and as generally unappealing. The term 'medium' might be interpreted as typical/ representative of his class; the significance of this possibility will become clearer from the description of his dining room (see below).

The position of the presentation of his wife, following that of Duncan and in the same paragraph, is in itself indicative of the married relationship: Ellen is subservient to Duncan. In this case the two adjectives which precede the nouns in the description of Duncan become three, thus emphasising their impact and the contrast between them and those describing Duncan. Ellen is not only younger, she is smaller, thinner, and less healthy-looking; the alliteration (s,s,s, and l,l,l) highlights the adjectives. A certain physical unattractiveness is suggested by her 'prominent' eyes and her 'long, thin, and questioning' nose. However, it is clear to readers that she is a sympathetic character: her eyes are 'large', an adjective usually used in a positive sense with regard to eyes, and moreover, kind. The three adjectives qualifying Ellen's expression are powerfully suggestive: readers' inference with regard to the marital relationship is confirmed as they imagine this woman, whose life has been what is often referred to as 'sheltered' ('innocent'), has nonetheless had to bear a great deal ('harried'). Again, the narrator is at pains to remain distanced from the reader, using evaluative terms both to engender sympathy for Ellen and to imply the slightly

ludicrous aspect of her appearance. Thus the tone achieved enables readers to appreciate, with the narrator, the pathos and the poignant irony of Ellen's situation and character.

The day was Christmas Day in the year 1885, and the room was the usual dining room of an eighteenth century country house. The later additions to the room had honourable place, and every opportunity to dominate its character, and used the last in the powerful manner of objects of the Victorian age, seeming in so doing to rank themselves with their possessor. (*A House and its Head* 5)

Again Compton-Burnett seeks to maintain a distanced point of view: the omniscient narrator stands back to observe the scene, communicating directly with readers, and inviting them to share his/her perceptions; this is achieved by the assumption on the part of the narrator that the reader will share his/her experience and standards with regard to the generic and evaluative terms used, for example, what a 'usual' dining room might consist of. The narrator does not find it necessary to provide a proliferation of visual detail, preferring rather to drive home an impression, generated by such value-laden words as 'honourable', 'dominate,' 'powerful', the whole evocative of that most august of eras, the 'Victorian age'; readers have already met 'their possessor', whose standing is consolidated by such possessions. S/he points out the class of the Edgeworths ('country house'), and emphasises the continuity of ownership ('later additions'). The possibility of the Edgeworth family's representation of their class, mentioned above, is confirmed: Compton-Burnett's preferred setting is the 'big house' of the village, housing the 'squire' and his family.

Still within the first few pages, the elder of the Edgeworth daughters is introduced:

Nance Edgeworth was a tall, thin girl of twenty-four, with her father's head placed rather squarely on her shoulders, her mother's features set a little awry on her face, and an expression that was her own. (*A House and its Head* 7)

Readers may not succeed in evoking a full mental picture of Nance from this description; however, it is clear that whereas she is her parents' daughter, she has a mind of her own, as is revealed by the reference to her expression; in view of her father's strength of mind, readers are not surprised by this. The significance of Mantel's critique with regard to inherited physical features is indicated here (see p.4, above).

The paragraphs below (from *Brothers and Sisters*), introducing Andrew Stace and his home, follow the same pattern. (Alison Light, in *Forever England*, quotes much of the following two passages from this novel, and puts forward many of the same observations (pp.37, 38). She does not analyse the diction, concentrating rather on the significance of the passages.)

He lived in the time when the claims of birth were open and unassailed, and saw his pedigree of farming squires a ground for a feeling that vitalised his daily experience. One of the religious movements had swept him away in his youth; and a stern and simple Protestantism had mingled with his pride of race, had leavened his mind and his outlook, had given him a passionate zest for purity of life, and an eager satisfaction in the acknowledged rectitude of his own. When Andrew read prayers to his household, his spirit was that in which he surveyed his lands, of humility and authority, of arrogance and gratitude, of conviction of the worthiness of what he said and was and had. When he spoke of his Maker, he spoke simply of the being who had made him – and perhaps been pleased in this case to execute one of his outstanding

pieces of work. The capital letter was on his lips and in his heart. What was made was good. Andrew's native village of Moreton Edge lay at the gates of the manor house that was his home; and around lay the grounds of the manor of Moreton Edge that was his heritage. (1-2)

Again, the narrator appears to survey the scene from a distance, assuming the ability of the reader to share his/her own perceptions: that they both understand the generic notions of 'claims of birth', the 'pedigree of farming squires', 'his pride of race', and 'a stern and simple Protestantism'. The narrator concentrates on aspects of Andrew's character and attitude rather than on physical appearance, providing again a litany of value-laden words such as 'vitalised', 'swept', 'passionate', 'zest', 'eager'. The second part of the third sentence ('of humility and authority, of arrogance and gratitude, of conviction of the worthiness of what he said and was and had'), by means of the parallel pairs of contradictory introverted nouns and the rhythmic repetition of the end of the sentence, carries readers along in the spirit created by the previous sentence; the two pairs of nouns denote the twin poles of Andrew's view of his life: authority and arrogance in the face of his fellow human beings, humility and gratitude before his Maker. After an ironic glimpse (still provided by the narrative voice) at Andrew's own opinion of himself, we return to shorter, simpler sentence structures before the repetitively structured clauses of the final sentence, the last word in each clause embodying the twin, inseparable themes of Andrew's life: his home and heritage.

In both novels the identification of the 'squire' with his home and heritage, more overt in *Brothers and Sisters*, is significant; in *A House and its Head* the narrator goes so far as to tell readers that the furnishings, and by implication the house, 'rank' with their owner, whilst in *Brothers and Sisters* 'Andrew's village' and his grounds

are at his very gates. In both instances the notion of possession is strongly indicated. However, it is the exterior of the Stace family home which is initially presented to readers:

The manor house built of mellow, plum-coloured brick had its forecourt severed by a dwarf wall and black-painted iron railings from the village street. The pediment covering the front of the house was pierced by a circular window like a watching eye; as it might be the eye of Andrew brooding over his world. On the keystone of the arched doorway was cut a date in the reign of Anne, and above it the letters A.M.S., the initials of the builder of the house and his wife, Andrew and Mary Stace. Andrew sat at the head of the table, with his adopted son and his daughter, some time in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a fine old man over eighty, massive in the bone, with a high, arched nose, and full blue eyes set under a heavy brow, now passing from a late vigour into the feebleness of the last days. (2)

The house's history this time is indicated by the date and the initials on the keystone, and the evocative use of 'mellow' and 'plum-coloured' to describe the brick appears to speak to the contented and dignified domesticity of the lives lived behind the façade. Yet readers become aware of the ironic contrast between this first implication and the following one: the forecourt is 'severed' by a wall which is 'dwarf' and 'black-painted', the pediment is 'pierced' by a 'watching eye', which is conflated with Andrew, who is 'brooding' over 'his' world. The violence of the negatively value-laden language is unmistakable: readers draw possible inferences of darkness, of a harsh cutting up of the property (and by implication the family), a deviation from the norm within the family ('dwarf'), and a menacing presence looming over all. The era in which the events unfold is provided in the most generic of terms

(‘some time in the latter half of the nineteenth century’), and only after this brief indication are we provided with a sparse physical description of Andrew Stace (the menacing presence), which stresses his past strength and distinction (‘fine’, ‘massive’, ‘high’, ‘full’, ‘heavy’, ‘vigour’). It is almost with relief that readers learn of Andrew’s ‘feebleness’, a word with considerable impact after the force of the preceding strong terms.

The presentation of Sophia Stace, Andrew’s daughter, offers further evidence of Compton-Burnett’s interest in lineage as shown in physical form, thus supporting Mantel’s contention, and reinforces the notions of inheritance and heritage which play a considerable part in these novels. Sophia was described as:

a feminine edition of her father ... There was little need to add the feminine. His qualities had not lost in their descent. The high, arched nose, and high, arched brow, the full, blue eye and short but finished build had gained; and in their feminine form made for beauty in his daughter’s womanhood ... Other things there were in Sophia that she knew in herself; for Andrew had waived his belief in birth in his choice of his life companion and the continuer of his line [he had bequeathed his estate to his adopted son]. (*Brothers and Sisters* 4)

The unhappy position of many of the women of this class and time is suggested, because, although Andrew Stace is not the callous tyrant that Duncan Edgeworth is, his wife has already died. We may assume she has been defeated by the unequal struggle she has faced throughout her married life, implied by the opening paragraph of the novel, which immediately precedes the two quoted above.

Andrew was accustomed to say, that no man had ever despised him, and no man had ever broken him in. The omission of woman from his statement was due to his omission of her from his conception of executive life. No one disputed his assertions, though the truth of the latter had afforded satisfaction to few besides himself. He was of the class of men and women, though he would hardly have assigned himself to a class, even less a mixed one, who consider hastiness a sign of a generous heart. It was true that no man had despised him, though he would hardly have denied that he had despised many, not to say most of the men he had met, which perhaps puts the generosity of heart on the other side. Women he carefully did not despise, regarding the precaution as becoming to an Englishman and a gentleman, and not considering whether it implied a higher opinion of women or himself. It was also true that no one had broken him in, if by this he meant that all had given up effort to improve him, few had loved him, and none were at ease in his presence. (1)

The paragraph is another example of resolutely maintained distance. The omniscient narrator uses a metaphor ('broken him in'), expressed in strongly assertive terms by means of a device rare in Compton-Burnett's work, a Narrative Report of a Speech Act (see Leech and Short (1987), 259 -260); Wales (1989), 314), which is appropriate for a horse-riding squire to apply to human beings; the business-like vocabulary of the second sentence reflects Andrew's careful attention with regard to his dealings with women, and is supported by the penultimate sentence; the two suggest a lack not only of understanding but also of consideration of women. The two implicitly negative Narrative Reports of Thought Acts – 'he would hardly have assigned himself' and 'he would hardly have denied' – suggest Andrew's opinion of

himself; ‘it was [also] true that...’, a reiteration of Andrew’s claim in the opening sentence, appears to provide a direct insight into Andrew’s mind that cannot be contested. However, the narrator proposes a series of caveats to his claim. The paragraph as a whole starts with a potentially positive self-assessment by Andrew, but the narrator’s ironic stance is quickly established: Andrew, who considers himself to be strong, generous, and admirable, is deficient in his relationships with members of the opposite sex; few who know him share his opinion of himself; the fourth sentence suggests that he is mistaken in his belief in his generosity, while the potentially positive effect of the beginning of the final sentence is nullified by the remainder of it. (Astute readers, seeing almost two pages taken up by these opening paragraphs which apparently present the principal character, yet which end with a reference to their subject’s approaching death, are alerted to the possibility of something more dislocating than that death.)

*Men and Wives* offers readers a further insight into Mantel’s putative formula:

Harriet was of better family than Godfrey, and had brought a darker heritage in her older blood. She had worn early in nerves and brain, with others of an inbred race, and an intense religious and family life bore heavily on her feebleness. (7)

Again, the novelist devotes time to heritage, this time to one of its potential dangers. The threat is compounded by the contrast between her heritage and that of her husband, whose origins are ‘in trade’; such dilutions of old blood were quite frequent in the landed classes during late Victorian times; as revenues declined, ‘new money’ became desirable, and was perhaps seen as beneficial to those who feared the possible effects of an ‘inbred race’.

The rector of the Edgeworths' parish in *A House and its Head* is presented in Chapter Two:

The parson conducted the service in a cold, impersonal manner, making it as brief as he could. He was a strong, solid man about thirty-eight, with face and hair and eyes of much the same colour, high, marked features, and a set, enigmatic expression. His discourse took the line of a lecture rather than a sermon, and was to earn a parishioner's comment, that faith as deep as his would hardly appear on the surface. In fact, his concern with his faith was limited to this level, as it was years since it had existed on any other. His scepticism had not led him to relinquish his living, as he had a slender income, and a widowed mother to support, and no other means of reconciling the conditions. He hoped his duties would be less well done by a stupider man, as a believer would probably be; and his views, though of some inconvenience to himself, were of none to his congregation, as they were beyond the range of its suspicions. (*A House and its Head* 16)

This description of Oscar Jekyll will delight many readers not only because of its succinct and implicative *aperçus* into his character but also by its exemplification of Compton-Burnett's irony, which is immediately in evidence: the first sentence opens with 'the parson' and includes the words 'cold' and 'impersonal', a 'collocative collision' (Leech and Short 223). Compton-Burnett has again assumed that readers share her evaluation of the terms used, both unarguably considered undesirable as attributes of a parish priest. The adjectives applied to his features (*high, marked*) indicate strength, an ambiguous quality; however, those describing his facial expression (*set, enigmatic*) suggest impenetrability, thus reinforcing our first impression. Readers are therefore not surprised to discover that his sermons resemble

lectures, and brief ones at that; his parishioner's ambivalent remark concerning Oscar's faith is revealed as ironic only by the following sentence, which explains his position in regard to his faith, and at the same time his need for impenetrability. An added irony is that readers realise that the parishioner's remark may well be sincere. However, the opening phrase of the fourth sentence ('In fact') alerts readers to the possibility of a discrepancy between appearances and actuality: the initial impression of Oscar's unsuitability may be mistaken. The implication of strength, the wry humour of the parishioner's comment, Oscar's financial difficulties, his care for his 'widowed mother', a pathos-laden phrase, start to generate a degree of sympathy. The final sentence of the paragraph is masterly in its multi-layered irony: the humility implied by the verb 'hoped' mitigates his view of his fellow-clergymen; readers learn, moreover, that he is a man of conscience who is 'inconvenienced' by his hypocrisy and concerned for the proper performance of his 'duties', and that his performance is indeed satisfactory in his parishioners' eyes. Yet by an infrequent usage of Indirect Thought ('Oscar hoped that ...') the narrator invites readers to share Oscar's point of view, which remains that believers are 'probably' stupid.

The above analyses demonstrate that despite the infrequency and brevity of Compton-Burnett's descriptions of her characters and their settings, her narrators succeed in delineating not only an (admittedly short) outline of her characters and their homes and estates in physical terms; they also, by the deployment of implicatory lexis, convey to readers all the background in terms of salient character traits, class, and financial and familial circumstances required to understand the developments of plot and situation.

In the novels under consideration there is very little description of clothes or soft furnishings, though at the beginning of Chapter Three of *A House and its Head* there

is a brief discussion of Justine's dress. The family is waiting for the arrival of Matty on the occasion of her first visit to them in their family home, and Blanche is anxious that the children should make a good impression; the discussion reveals the family's relative poverty.

That Compton-Burnett's point of view appears distanced needs no further argument: it is clearly evident from the relative lack of narrative, description, and exposition and the reliance on generic statements in her work, and is recognised as such by numerous commentators. However, the above discussions have already started to reveal the extent to which that distance is subverted. Tristram's complaint is not without substance – the descriptions of the Edgeworths' dining room and the Stace family residence clearly assume common experience between reader and writer – and it must be admitted that some readers prefer more expansive and reassuring descriptions; even so, to label Compton-Burnett's stance with regard to scene-setting as 'perverse alienation' (Tristram 27) of the reader is exaggerated. Compton-Burnett's indirect appeal to her readers by means of such generic descriptions and other such common assumptions with regard to knowledge and attitude is an important strand in her establishment of her tone. Her stance alongside the reader, and thus her tone in communicating with them, is instrumental in conveying the irony which has been noted. Mantel's contention that Compton-Burnett's descriptions are 'seldom memorable' holds water – we do not remember extensive details imposed upon us by Compton-Burnett, but we are free to conjure up our own versions of the characters who play the roles. What we certainly are aware of is the tyranny of the first, the subservience of the second, the arrogance of the third, the scepticism of the fourth, and the class of all of them: this awareness is the readers' foundation as s/he continues to read, and the establishment of this foundation is part

of Mantel's 'formula'. We are conscious too of the notion of 'heritage', not only in terms of house and estate, but also of lineage and blood; we are thus reminded that the human faults which underpin Compton-Burnett's themes are indeed 'universal: jealousy, lust, greed, betrayal' (Mantel viii). Moreover, in confining herself to the upper middle class as the background against which to explore human frailties, Compton-Burnett suggests the possible weaknesses inherent in these families.

Sarraute's description of Compton-Burnett's introductory paragraphs as 'outmoded' is as mistaken as those of the English critics who complain of their inadequacy. Compton-Burnett's descriptions are innovative; they are short, and they do not dwell unduly on 'sense data'. Rather, using such devices as alliteration, repetition and value-laden vocabulary, they evoke characteristics and attitudes, and these are borne out as readers continue.

**b) Narrative Interpolations** (*See Introduction, pp. 30, 35, with reference to sections b), c), d), e), and f).*)

Whilst it is true that Compton-Burnett relies on the omniscient narrator less frequently and less lengthily than many novelists, passages of narrative and/or description are not entirely absent, sometimes in the form of single sentences (which may function as description), sometimes in paragraphs.

In *Daughters and Sons*, two consecutive paragraphs of twenty-nine lines in total narrate Hetta Ponsonby's realisation of her mother Sabine's misunderstanding of Edith Haslam's position and her (Sabine's) consequent machinations to bring about her son John's proposal of marriage to Edith: the narrative interpolation shows that Hetta sees too that Edith believes John to be entirely sincere in his proposal. Her realisation of 'the blind and blindly crossing forces' which are about to alter the

whole course of her own life foreshadows her impending psychological disintegration (see p.66).

The first six sentences of the interpolation contain ten clauses which consist of a finite verb of which Hetta is the subject ('Hetta' once, 'she' seven times); by this repetition the impression is created in the reader that the two paragraphs are narrated from Hetta's point of view: readers sit with her, observing, thinking what she thinks: a rare change of focalization in Compton-Burnett's work. Hetta is not simply 'struck' by one thought; the repetitive structure represents the successive blows as each thought strikes her consciousness. Hetta, poignantly, 'sits alone with her thoughts'; by contrast, she sees 'a sudden wave of comprehension surge over Edith's face', and readers learn, twice, that 'light' comes to Edith. The confirmation of the accuracy of Hetta's suspicions ('She saw by an advertisement...' (see p. 66)) is followed by her full realisation of the situation, expressed in a bald statement, in which the opposing verbs are striking and evocative: 'Many things rose up before her and fell into place'. In the final sentence of the first paragraph, the succession of subordinate clauses, in reminding readers of the plot, builds up to the plainly expressed main clause, reflecting the finally achieved certainty in Hetta's mind.

The second paragraph is less emotively written, narrating in a matter-of-fact manner the steps taken by Hetta to verify her conclusion and her further discovery of the true author of the novel. There is the same lack of particular detail readers have previously noticed: the town is unnamed, the errand unspecified. In the last sentence there is an echo of the beginning of the first paragraph (the verb 'saw' is used twice), thus leaving readers with the same picture they 'saw' at the opening of the scene. The final clause is the stark expression of the impact the full realisation of her

position has on Hetta, the repetition of ‘blind/blindly’ reinforcing the powerlessness of the individual, in this case Hetta, in the face of fate.

Not long afterwards four consecutive paragraphs totalling thirty-six lines, the first two noticeably longer than the second two, narrate and describe the effect of Hetta’s absence from the Ponsonby household as the family waits to hear the news of her threatened suicide or of its prevention. The last, and shortest, paragraph brings to an end this relatively long intervention in the narrative voice, and introduces into the anxious household two ‘outsiders’, Charity Marcon and Sir Rowland Seymour (see p. 67). On this occasion the narrator has remained an observer, but has stepped closer to empathise with the stricken family.

All four paragraphs are related by the omniscient narrator, objectively and each with a different focus. The first, from a detached standpoint, surveys the functioning – or lack of it – of the household; disarray seems to prevail. Meals do not appear on time; the members of the household are visited in turn – the servants are not following their routine, the young people are restless and distressed; Sabine’s state of mind is depicted with particular pathos, emphasised by repetition (‘hardly’) and by such emotive vocabulary as ‘wandering’ and ‘low wail’; this is the picture in readers’ minds at the end of the paragraph. However, this description of a family and a household in material and emotional chaos is interrupted, in the fourth sentence, by John’s ‘calm’ and ‘firm’ action, expressed in appropriate terms. The narrator has indeed given a ‘first sign’: it will be possible for the family and the household to manage without Hetta.

Nonetheless, in the second paragraph the mood of distress again prevails. In the minds of the younger generation their aunt has assumed greater importance: ‘... the whole course of their lives depended on her’; there is repetition of structure (‘they

could not eat or drink or sleep' (see p.67)), 'a life with her husband, clouded, burdened, shamed' (see p.67); vocabulary pertinent to their feelings is powerfully evaluative ('mighty', 'failed and fell away', 'one great feeling', 'clouded, burdened, shamed', 'wandered on', 'remorse' (see p.67). The contrast between Victor's intended tone – 'admonishing and firm' – and the tone he achieved – 'childish and sharp' (see p.67) – is poignant, and the very few words of the two loquacious characters Chilton and France are strongly indicative of their distraught state of mind. The evocative vocabulary continues in the third paragraph: the day 'seemed to get itself' (see p.67) to its end, the implication of struggle very strong. The implication continues: dealing with the passage of time is reinforced by the description of the hours, in which no-one felt able to do anything ('The hours could only pass by themselves' (see p. 67)), and the negatively-valued list 'dragging, failing, breaking down' (see p. 67) epitomises the depths of their anxiety. The following sentence is the indication of the beginning of their recovery; it is a bald statement of fact with regard to a meal, picking up John's positive action in the first of these four paragraphs, and is followed by a hint of the glimmer, only 'dim' at this point, which the family is able to perceive. The last two sentences state in very simple terms and then reiterate twice more what is revealed to them by the glimmer: it is evident that the worst is over, and indeed in the fourth paragraph, shorter than the previous three and narrated in brisk, value-free language, two friends arrive to share the Ponsonbys' anxiety. Their arrival has the effect of breaking the tension.

Following Hetta's voluntary return, another narrative/ descriptive paragraph (of thirteen lines) closes the chapter (see p.68). The paragraph makes clear the radical alteration in the family relationships and the ensuing change in their behaviour and attitudes. The first sentence, of only four words, is a definite confirmation of the

‘truth’; the next four sentences are substantially longer (seventeen, nineteen, seventeen, and sixteen lines respectively), and describe the mood now prevailing in the household, again rendered in value-laden terms: ‘hover on the brink’, ‘threatened’, ‘gradually fell away’, ‘betraying’ (see p.68). However, despite the fact that the ‘truth’ has been confirmed, the members of the household cannot re-establish the *status quo ante*; the mood of each member in turn is identified as changed. The remaining five sentences, of varying lengths and lacking the emotional language of the beginning of the paragraph, shift in tone; they provide brief exposition of the revised dynamic of the Ponsonby family. The first of the five establishes, briefly and unemotionally, what perhaps is the most significant change: John and Edith are openly ‘husband and wife’. The fourth and fifth sentences express a contradiction which is the nub of the relationships in the family: John and his sister, John and his wife. The sentence starting ‘Their father worked alone, as he was to work for the rest of his life...’ (see p.68) offers an insight into the future, a rare and noteworthy example of dramatic irony in Compton-Burnett’s novels. The final sentence, using a repeated negative structure (‘had not done’ (see 68)) sums up forcefully the effect brought about by Hetta’s action. It is profoundly ironic that Hetta, in failing in her intention, brings about the opposite consequence.

Another example of Compton-Burnett’s use of narrative interpolation, this time single-sentence interpolations, is to be found in Chapter 19 of *More Women than Men* (see pp. 69 – 72). Josephine finds her brother Jonathan in an unsettled mood: his partner of twenty-two years, Felix Bacon, has recently decided not only to leave Jonathan, but to get married. After making an emotional speech, in which he appears ‘restless and uncontrolled’, Jonathan responds unexpectedly to Josephine’s attempt to tell him why she has come: ‘Jonathan stared at his sister, with his hands still, and

suddenly threw himself back in a fit of laughter' (*More Women than Men* 186). In the following six pages, readers discover nineteen more single-sentence interpolations.

'Jonathan went into further laughter, this time it seemed as a cover for his feelings' (see p. 69).

'almost shouted her brother' (see p. 69).

'said Jonathan, with an openly crafty expression' (see p. 69)

'cried Jonathan, sweeping the pile together, and causing some to flutter to the ground' (see p. 70)

'Jonathan spoke in a harsh manner, glancing at the paper' (see p. 70).

'Jonathan moved his hand towards it, but withdrew it and gazed at the ground' (see p.70).

'Jonathan was sitting with his shoulders hunched, his eyes looking straight before him, his body still' (see p.70).

'Jonathan plunged his hands about on his desk, drumming his feet about on the ground' (see p.70).

'Jonathan laughed and drew with a pencil on his desk' (see p.71).

'Jonathan's voice fell away again into laughter' (see p. 71).

'He moved his fingers as though he were playing the piano, and moved his lips, as if in song' (see p.71).

‘said Jonathan, shutting his lips’ (see p. 71).

‘said Jonathan, banging down his hands’ (see p. 71

‘Jonathan moved his hands and feet together, adding the pedals to his performance’ (see p. 71).

‘Jonathan raised his eyes, with a movement of snapping his fingers’ (see p. 71).

‘Jonathan turned to the door, with his pipe set jauntily between his teeth’ (see p.71).

‘He made a motion towards the paper ...’ (see p.72).

‘said Jonathan, with simple testiness’ (see p. 72).

‘His voice grew loud and hard’ (see p.72).

Seven of the above statements appear in mid-paragraph on continuous lines, preceded and followed by dialogue; thus an effect of haste and lack of control is created. All nineteen actions represent only Jonathan’s behaviour; some of his utterances are accompanied by extended attributions (‘with an openly crafty expression’ (see above), ‘sweeping the pile together and causing some to flutter to the ground’ (see above), ‘banging down his hands’ (see above); the unusual reporting verb ‘almost shouted’ (see above) occurs on page 187 of the novel, and ‘cried’ on page 188. Jonathan’s uncontrolled body-language is matched by his speech, which is jerky and aggressive: ‘You would not like me to have it [gratitude], as it [Gabriel’s allowance] comes in? ... To tell him to send it back to me? Was it fair to take me by

surprise? To behave as if you did not know me?’ (187). ‘I know nothing; I say nothing. As you know my words mean nothing, why ask me?’ (189).

At the beginning of this episode readers’ sympathies are with Jonathan, but towards the bottom of p.188 Josephine picks up a paper and recognises the handwriting. By the top of the following page she has read it; it reveals that Maria Rosetti is Gabriel’s mother. (During her long service at the school Maria, who will later become Josephine’s lover and her professional partner, has never revealed her relationship either to Gabriel or to his father Jonathan, who has similarly deceived his sister Josephine. Josephine has thus been able to develop semi-maternal and other more equivocal feelings for Gabriel, which she would not have felt free to do had she lived in the constant presence of his mother.) The scene is thus as emotionally charged for Josephine as for Jonathan, yet she retains her self-control, speaking ‘in a quiet, charged tone’ (189). Only the use of the reporting verb ‘cried’ (190) and her ‘uncertain smile’ (192) betray her increasing distress before she stands ‘as if arrested for a moment’ (193) and ‘rather blindly’ (*ibid.*) gives Felix her hand and leaves the house. Josephine has been disturbed both by Jonathan’s words and gestures but also by her close colleague Maria’s dissimulation.

The juxtaposition of dialogue and narrative sentences in the same paragraph, Jonathan’s immoderate speech and body-language, the frequent short and forceful interpolations and marked extended attributions, contrast forcefully with what readers have perceived as Josephine’s struggle to control herself. The result is a powerful scene in which the significance of what has emerged for both Jonathan and Josephine impacts forcefully on readers: both characters must come to terms with a radical revision of what they have believed about their past lives and of how they will be able to live their future lives. Readers’ perception of the extent of the

emotional distress of both Jonathan and Josephine is intensified by the contrast between Josephine's control and Jonathan's lack of it. The episode proceeds at an almost breathless pace, the departure of Josephine bringing relief and release to the reader. Compton-Burnett succeeds in demonstrating her preference for developments which are 'carried through in the voices of the characters rather than in the voice of the author' (I. Compton-Burnett 1945, cited in Burkhart 1972, 21), but the claim that the narrative voice is absent is not tenable: fourteen narrative interpolations, three extended attributions, and two unusual reporting verbs, all relating to Jonathan, together with the insights into Josephine's turmoil, produce a scene in which the narrator's presence is strongly felt.

Compton-Burnett's ability as a writer is visible in both the longer and the shorter narrative interpolations examined above. Such interventions are to be found in the other novels in this study, though more frequently in some novels than in others. Despite their relative scarcity, what is clear in all cases is that the narrator's presence is strongly felt, perhaps on occasion by means of a shift in point of view but always by the use of skilfully deployed vocabulary and sentence structure.



Hetta observed the instinctive action, and saw a sudden wave of comprehension surge over Edith's face. She waited for her brother and his wife to leave her, and sat alone with her thoughts. She saw that light had come to Edith on the matter of the gifts to her husband; she thought of the words and action which had shed the light. She had not sorted the letters without doing so as her mother's daughter, though Hetta never broke the accepted code. She knew that Edith heard from a publisher, and, struck by a thought, she rose and found a paper. She saw by an advertisement that the same firm had issued the book by Edith's namesake, which had won the prize. The amount of the prize was that of the sums which had come to her brother. Many things rose up before her and fell into place. The scene when she surprised her mother tampering with the letters; her mother's subsequent willingness that Edith should marry her son; Edith's willingness to marry him; her mother's feeling to Edith—it all stood in relation and made a whole.

Later in the day she drove to the town on some regular errand, and obtained the book by Edith's namesake, or, as she now believed, by Edith. She read it in her room, assigning it to her brother's wife, but found that the book was based on the play which France had written and which they all had seen. Her mind was swift, and the lines of the truth were clear. She saw her mother's mistake, the cover which her niece had taken, Edith's belief that John had married her without ulterior motive; saw how her own life was altered by the blind and blindly crossing forces.

When she met her family, she felt an urge to probe the hidden danger.

“ I have mapped out the uses for the thousand pounds. It has been even easier the second time. The point of the sum seems to be that it should fall in regularly.”

They could do nothing for Sabine. She did not seem to see them, did not speak when they spoke, wandered until she sank from weakness, remained in any seat until she had strength to rise. The time passed and the men returned. They had found nothing, and brought just this amount of hope. Sabine came to meet them with an air of simple welcome, and, seeing them without her daughter, fell into a wild mood, crying to herself, starting up at every sound, making it an effort to move and breathe in her hearing or sight.

The brothers came and sat down with their sisters, boyish and silent. They were tired and kept their seats, and seemed by this to have gone further with the truth.

"We can do nothing more," said Chilton. "We have done nothing."

"Don't people sometimes drag rivers?" said Muriel.

"That would be no good," said Alfred, seeming to answer them all. "It would prevent nothing. It could only confirm it, and that would indeed be no good."

The midday meal was not on the table, the first sign that Hetta was not in the house. The servants were so used to waiting for orders, that they had waited, giving themselves to their emotions. The young people almost wondered if such things would be held to count. But John gave a calm, firm order for the meal, the first sign that others would do what his sister had done. Sabine hardly ate and hardly stayed at the table, and resumed her wandering, now with a low wail.

The picture of their home without their aunt was in the young minds. In their thought the whole course of their day depended on her. It seemed that they could not eat or drink or sleep without her. Her effort through the hours of all their days grew to a mighty thing. Their life failed

and fell away at every point. They seemed to lay down their separate natures and to be joined in one great feeling. Edith saw before her a life with her husband, clouded, burdened, shamed. Sabine wandered on, giving her unconscious cry. Muriel looked at the faces about her and wept. Clare did the same, less simply, feeling the rise of remorse. Victor tried to be admonishing and firm, and became childish and sharp. Chilton and France said a word to each other or were silent. Alfred swallowed some food and followed Sabine.

The day seemed to get itself to its end. Hetta was not there to guide it. The hours could only pass by themselves, dragging, failing, breaking down. The evening meal was on the table. It was met by a feeling of surprise and dim relief. Things could happen without Hetta. Other people could do what she had done; other people did what she had taught them to do.

In the evening Miss Marcon and Rowland came. The news had spread and they came from their families, sent to enquire and sympathise. Stephen might have done better than his sister. Miss Marcon's impression of humour was something she could not lay aside.

"We will not speak," she said, standing with her opaque eyes seeming to strive for expression. "Words are no good. We will just say nothing. We had to come to do what we could."

Sabine had raised her eyes—she was unable to raise her head—and Rowland caught the look and came to her.

"It is too much; it is too much," he said, kneeling by her chair. "You must not face it. Try to look aside. It may not be as it seems."

"It ought to have been me," said Miss Marcon in deep,

"She thought he did not appreciate what she did for him."

"What would have happened, if Aunt Hetta had stayed away longer and given the plan a chance?"

"Grandma would be dead, and we should all be in the power of Aunt Hetta."

"She wanted the last," said France, "and she must have wanted it very much. And I don't know that it was too much to want in return for her life."

"France is fonder of Aunt Hetta than other people are," said Muriel. "But Aunt Hetta is not so fond of France as other people are. We shall never forget this time, shall we?"

"We shall have to pretend to forget it," said France. "Aunt Hetta is going to be embarrassed by it. She is already embarrassed."

This was the truth. The next days seemed to hover on the brink of something which threatened and gradually fell away. Hetta did her usual work, but gave it less time, betraying her sense that it had lost its mystery. Sabine recovered part of her strength, but seldom spoke, and never left Hetta in a room alone. John and his sister fell into their habit of talk, but never said an intimate word. John and Edith were openly husband and wife. The young people dealt with their aunt on easier terms. Their father worked alone, as he was to work for the rest of his life, and had more time for his family. The servants recognised Edith's authority as well as Hetta's. Hetta had not done what she meant to do, but she had not done nothing.

## MORE WOMEN THAN MEN

"I did not say so. He insisted on it. The poor boy wanted to have something from his father; and I wanted, wretched old man, that he should have it. I have not been able to give much to him; it seemed I could give him this; and what was the meaning of it from no one, the good of it from nowhere? The giver would never have made herself known, made himself known—he, she, it—what a silly thing secrets are! They make us solve them somehow. Well, I gave my solution of this." Jonathan went into further laughter, this time it seemed as a cover for his feelings.

"It was an extraordinary thing to do."

"Why was it extraordinary? It served a purpose for two people."

"Did you mean it for a sort of joke?"

"No, it was not a joke; it was a temptation. Why was it a joke to give my son an illusion, that his father had done something for him, one little thing in all his life? You don't understand the pathos of never being able to give."

"Well, what are we to do now? You know who the giver is? It is a woman, did you say?"

"No, I did not; I say nothing," almost shouted her brother. "I do not speak the truth, so of what use to tell you? Of what use to speak at all? You would not be any wiser. When I told Gabriel, he was not any wiser, was he?"

"I am afraid he was not. But what are we to tell him now? He must know that the money does not come from you, as he insists on returning it."

"You would not like me to have it, as it comes in?" said Jonathan, with an openly crafty expression. "To tell him to send it back to me? Was it fair to take me by surprise? To behave as if you did not know me?"

"Come, pull yourself together. Tell me what you wish me to say."

"Oh, say that the money comes from you. Say that I

began to give it and stopped, and that you continued it. That sounds true to life and character. Or say that you always gave it, and did not like to seem to give so much. That saves my face, and ends my concern with the matter."

"We must say something. We can hardly admit either the truth or the mystery. Gabriel might talk about it to Felix and his other friends."

"Well, say that then. Have the credit for yourself, and understand how I felt in trying to get it."

"It is a funny person I have for a brother, to be sure. What are you doing, making that mess and muddle? Are you stirring up your papers or sorting them?"

"Stirring them up, stirring them up!" cried Jonathan, sweeping the pile together, and causing some to flutter to the ground. "Stirring them up for the bonfire! The past may have what is its own. Let my dead things go before me."

"You are not in a mood to make a decision. So we may as well give your account for the moment," said Josephine, picking up a paper and toying with it, her eyes down. "One story is as good as another, when neither can be true. This is a familiar writing, Miss Rosetti's, from a long time ago. A hand does not change any more than a face; or it changes like a face, becomes older and remains the same. Gabriel will have no need to speak of this, Jonathan. I will explain our joint thought of him, and he will be grateful."

"I shall have his gratitude after all, shall I? We shall both have it, you more out of proportion than I." Jonathan spoke in a harsh manner, glancing at the paper.

"Miss Rosetti might have been my partner by now," continued Josephine in the same conversational tone; "but she had some reason against it; some question of money, I suppose. I may offer to give her a partnership; why should we go through life doing nothing for our friends? This note has no beginning or end." Jonathan

moved his hand towards it, but withdrew it and gazed at the ground. "The writing is clearer than her writing now. The words stand out apart. Gabriel is safe for life, and I will no longer see him as mine. That is best for all of us. This is my very last word, Maria—Maria! Maria Rosetti! What is this, Jonathan? Had Miss Rosetti anything to do with Gabriel when he was young? Did she know him then? Tell me it all."

"Of course she knew him then. She is my old friend, as you know. She had some thoughts of adopting him, and changed her mind."

"Did she ever adopt him? This sounds as if he had belonged to her. Tell me the truth." Jonathan was sitting with his shoulders hunched, his eyes looking straight before him, his body still. "He was only a few months old when I took him; and she came to me soon afterwards. Is this what it seems to be?"

"I know nothing; I say nothing. As you know my words mean nothing, why ask me?" Jonathan plunged his hands about on his desk, drumming his feet on the ground.

"Your wife never existed?"

"You have never believed she did exist. To pose as knowing less than you do, is not the way to get to know everything."

"You pretended to be a widower for Gabriel's sake?"

"And for my own sake, and your sake, and the sake of your girls' school. You did not want me to do anything else, did you? If you had an alternative, why did you not offer it?"

"I see you could do nothing else," said Josephine, in a quiet, charged tone. "But you could do something else than put Maria Rosetti into my house; to watch me in my life with Gabriel; to spy on my dealings with him; to satisfy herself that he was safe; while I, your sister, went on my way, unwarned, watched, in danger. You could have done something other than this, Jonathan."

"No, I could not, to serve my double purpose. It was the only thing that could serve it. Why should I not put them both in your house for you to look after?" Jonathan laughed and drew with a pencil on his desk. "You have served yourself and Gabriel and her and me. Surely it was a good thing that you should serve us? And if you had made her your partner, it would have been a good finish up. It is a pity that you did not see your way to it, before her position changed, before she changed her mind."

"Oh, that is it!" cried Josephine. "I see it all. Miss Rosetti gave the money to Gabriel! She saw the chance at long last of doing something for his future. And I think it was time. If you want a finish up, this does very well."

"I am glad it satisfies you; I should have preferred the other myself. It would have been better for her, and through her better for me; and Gabriel would have got as much from you in the end." Jonathan's voice fell away again into laughter. "Well, you know all my story now. I can be at ease in your house. If I want a word with Maria, I shan't have to hide it." He moved his fingers as though he were playing the piano, and moved his lips as if in song.

"Tell me about your earlier life with her."

"No, I will not," said Jonathan, shutting his lips. "When have you asked me about my life with Gabriel's mother? I was a widower to you, wasn't I? It is not worth while to change my habits now. I will prepare myself for the long silence."

"Why did you not marry her? I suppose Gabriel is really your son?"

"Oh, know it all, know it all," said Jonathan, banging down his hands. "Gabriel is Maria's son and mine. She did not want to marry me. She wanted to support herself; and I did not want to support her. I put her in your school to work for herself, and, as you have said—it seemed to me a natural thing—to watch over her son."

She has not watched over him. She saw he was safe, as you say, or she saw nothing. If she did not look, she would not see. I don't know why she came to his help over his marriage. When I asked her for money, she did not often give it to me."

"She has lived in my house, as Gabriel's mother, deceiving me, letting me give her my trust, treat her as my friend——"

"She has never lived in your house as Gabriel's mother. You have never treated her as a friend. She has worked in your school and earned your trust."

"I must see her," said Josephine, drawing herself up. "I cannot tell her simply, that there are some things on which I cannot turn my eyes."

"Yes, tell her that simply. Turn her out and keep her son. I don't mind what you do. She has not cared for Gabriel; we have agreed never to speak of him; I could not bear her words of my son. She can have my money to live on, and I will live on you; I don't mind living on a woman." Jonathan moved his hands and feet together, adding the pedals to his performance.

"What are we to say about the allowance? Gabriel can never know the truth."

"Keep to the account we settled on. Take something else from his mother."

"I have borne that from her, which no woman should bear from another," said Josephine, in slow, recitative tones. "I do not speak of her having a child; I would not speak of her in that matter, except as another woman should speak." Jonathan raised his eyes, with a movement of snapping his fingers. "I have my own understanding. I could sympathise with her there."

"Well, sympathise then; because I could not; she has repelled my sympathy all along the line. Well, who comes here?" Jonathan turned to the door with his pipe set jauntily between his teeth. "So, Felix, it has come on me at last! It has come out at the end. We need never think

## MORE WOMEN THAN MEN

to escape the end, of life or anything else. This is an end indeed." He made a motion towards the paper, and Felix took it up and turned to Josephine.

"You have had an experience that comes to very few," he said.

"Yes—yes, I have. I have to do my best with it. It is a revelation to me, something new. Well, I must try to do my best." Josephine suddenly spoke to her brother.

"So Felix has always known the truth?"

"Of course he has known. We could not have lived on the terms we have, with our tongues tied on our memories," said Jonathan, with simple testiness. "He has not known what we were talking of before, what you know now." His voice grew loud and hard. "I mean about the boy's money! But he may know. Another thing between us won't make much difference."

Josephine laid her hand on her brother's shoulder.

"He will not want to know. He will leave it between the brother and sister. He knows that that relation goes back to the beginning; that it is the longest, if not the deepest. He will leave it its own silences." She paused and turned to Felix with an uncertain smile. "I find myself in a difficult position, in a hard place. I cannot at the moment see my way."

"I could see mine in your position, the position of knowing something against someone who knew nothing against me. I should enjoy showing a quiet freedom from superiority. That has no point when you are really free from it. I have a great respect for you."

"I must do my best. It is a real experience. I must remember that it is real for someone else. Yes, there must have been much reality. There may be temptations to which I would not yield. I trust I shall not betray any littleness, any inclination to the use of power."

"I trust not: it would kill my respect."

"Well, my brother, I will leave you for to-day. The times of our separations will soon be of the past."

### c) Presentation of Speech

#### i) unattributed; said

Compton-Burnett frequently does not use even Sarraute's 'monotonous, clumsy, "said Jeanne", "answered Paul"' (Sarraute 118) to report her characters' utterances; a reader opening *Daughters and Sons* at pages 180 and 181, for example, will see a double page of twenty-six utterances with a single 'said John' as the sole attribution. However, when Compton-Burnett does report them, the attributive verb is usually 'to say', usually in the form 'said'. The impact of the narrative voice is further diminished by the placing of the attribution after the utterance, or in mid-utterance, in most cases. By using direct speech she seeks to convince the reader that the narrator is reporting verbatim what the character says: thus the character appears to be 'speaking' directly to, or within earshot of, the reader. The entire suppression of the reporting verb goes one step further, bringing into play a freer form of Direct Speech, known as Free Direct Speech (see Leech and Short (2007), 258 - 9; Wales (1989), 189). The narrator is now completely absent, leaving the reader 'listening in' directly to the conversation. Despite the infrequency of verbs of asking and answering (direct questions and their replies are usually either unattributed or attributed by 'said') the presence of punctuation such as speech marks, question marks and exclamation marks nonetheless reinforces the reader's invitation to listen. Indications such as italics are not used, however; thus narrative direction is still (apparently) minimal.

Clearly, the emphasis by Compton-Burnett's critics and commentators on the preponderance of dialogue, and on the apparent objectivity of the narratorial standpoint as evidenced by this emphasis and by her apparently minimal attributions,

appears at first sight justified. However, this thesis, by means of a close study of some of the novels, seeks to reveal that Compton-Burnett's means of 'quietly informing the reader' (Sarraute 118) are not always so monotonous: not only does she frequently not directly 'inform', preferring to leave the utterances unattributed, but she also provides subtle and suggestive aids to interpretation in order to make her voice heard.

On the occasion of John Ponsonby's proposal of marriage to Edith Haslam and her response to it (*Daughters and Sons*, referred to above), Compton-Burnett is at pains to establish maximum distance between narrator and narrative; readers must 'listen' attentively to every utterance in order to infer the subtleties of the developing motives and intentions of the two protagonists. The dialogue is preceded by two short narrative paragraphs, the first of which makes it clear that John believes his mother's assurance that Edith is his anonymous donor and moreover will welcome his proposal; further, his respect for Edith's intelligence is stated. Readers are told that 'He took an early chance of finding her alone' (*Daughters and Sons* 178); thus the following question is clearly uttered by John. The second brief descriptive paragraph outlines Edith's state of mind, leading readers to expect her to respond positively to John's question, which she indeed does; John's question is unattributed, Edith's reply is reported by 'she said'. There are then six unattributed utterances, followed by one with the simple 'said John' as the reporting clause, followed in turn by thirteen unattributed and another 'said John'. The passage ends with an exchange of thirty utterances in Free Direct Speech (see above), (*Daughters and Sons* 178-182).

When John initially approaches Edith to ask if he is welcome in her 'private domain', Edith's intuition leads her to ask, 'Are we to enter into a conspiracy?'

(*Daughters and Sons* 178). John's response – 'It must be almost that in this house' – reveals that he is aware of tension within the household, though to a lesser extent than Edith. After telling her that she has won his mother's heart, he takes a step towards expressing his intention: '...I have given myself to just as few. Do you see into my mind?' (ibid.179), thus indicating his perhaps instinctive belief in Edith's capacity to understand him. He is not disappointed: 'No. But you tell me what is in it, so I suppose I know' (ibid.). When she suggests that perhaps he should say 'a little more' (ibid.) he willingly agrees, expressing directly his wish that she should marry him and become a mother to his children, and suggesting his understanding of Edith's need to evaluate their complex situation: 'Do you see your way to it?' (ibid.) Edith's reply demonstrates not only her willingness to accept his proposal but also her sensitive appreciation of the complexity of their situation and her honesty in admitting it: 'I will try to do it, but I don't really see the way. What about your sister?' (ibid.). Her intelligence is again evident when she responds to John's assertion that he is not afraid of Hetta 'in any sense': 'I think you must be. Anyhow I am. And one sense is enough' (ibid.179). She continues to probe John in an attempt to make him face the problem of Hetta, which he is either unable or unwilling to do. Seeking to evade the issue, he suggests that he will simply be grateful to her (Hetta) for the past. Edith, however, is too acute to allow the evasion: 'That is a contradiction in terms. If gratitude for the past has no effect on the present, in what way are you grateful?' (ibid.). John persists: Hetta will always have a place in his heart and his house, but Edith is equally insistent: 'Of course she will. So what place shall I have? I mean in the house: places in the heart are easier' (ibid.). The fencing match continues for another two and a half pages, during which John demonstrates how far he is from understanding the complexities of the situation: speaking of Hetta's support since the death of his first wife, he adds, 'I hope I shall never forget

it' (180); his continuing incomprehension of his sister's nature is revealed a few moments later when he says of Hetta '... my sister will be simply glad to welcome you. She wants nothing but what is good for me' (ibid.181). Edith on the other hand demonstrates her understanding of Hetta's personality and of her feelings towards herself, Edith: '...Your sister has always wanted to get rid of me... She will manage the house but I shall have to be a member of it... She must want what is good for herself, like anyone else' (ibid.). Nor does she hesitate to express her opinion of John's treatment of Hetta: ('...you could have freed her. I really think you should have'(181)), or of the difficulties of a governess in the Ponsonby household and of herself as the previous incumbent: ('The new governess and I really should not meet, but I don't see how it can be managed. I will behave as if I knew nothing' (182)).

Despite Edith's apparent need to clarify the complexities of their situation, readers already know from the second short paragraph of narrative interpolation which precedes the proposal that she will be sympathetic to it:

Edith already knew [John's purpose]. John's manner and his mother's had told her, and she was glad the climax had come. The response she was ready to make, would have amazed her a year ago. Her sympathy with John in the constraint and isolation of his life and the threat of his future, his rather wistful friendship, her own susceptible age had resulted in a feeling which she had believed was foreign to herself. Sabine's watch for signs of that feeling had been to a point repaid. (178)

Indeed, it becomes clear after the first half-page that she will accept it ('I will try to do it...'). Throughout the episode John's inability – or reluctance – to respond to Edith's attempts to discuss their impending difficulties is manifest: he persists in

seeing the situation through rose-coloured spectacles. Despite readers' fore-knowledge of the outcome of the discussion, the dialogue is profoundly revelatory: readers do not simply hear John's proposal but are also able, unimpeded by any narratorial intervention, to concentrate on the implications of the wording of the proposal and of Edith's response, thus fully grasping his failure (whether unable or unwilling) to appreciate the problem of his sister and, conversely, Edith's considerable perspicacity, intelligence and honesty. All of this is essential background information if the further development of the plot is to be understood.

At face-value, such a lengthy and scantily reported dialogue might appear difficult to follow; by means of the two sympathetically-narrated preceding paragraphs, however, Compton-Burnett mitigates the difficulty: her readers are to a certain extent prepared for a scene not entirely in line with what might be expected of a proposal of marriage; moreover, the sympathetic point of view implied by these paragraphs in the narrative voice is shared by readers. Readers' expectations are therefore ambivalent: they have been warned that the occasion will not be conventionally romantic, yet they dare hope for a happy outcome; however, the immediate use of the word 'conspiracy' by Edith and its acceptance by John, in the context of a proposal of 'marriage', is sufficiently startling almost to merit the term 'collocative collision' (Leech and Short (2007), 224). Moreover, the discussion as a whole does nothing to minimise the ironic disparity between the romantic notion of a marriage proposal and the complexities attendant upon this one: while John is only partly aware of the nature of his sister's emotions, Edith's perceptions into Hetta's state of mind are more penetrating, and both of them are forthright in expressing their concerns. Indeed, an appropriate term for the scene might well be 'negotiation', as the two attempt to find common ground. At the end of the scene the lack of

resolution of the difficulties with regard to Hetta, and the added problem of a new governess, further confound readers' expectations: even at the moment of announcing their 'good news', the supposedly happy pair are still far from the romantic mood usually associated with such an event. Thus Compton-Burnett is able to maintain her ironic distance, afforded by the almost total inaudibility of the narrative voice during the dialogue: readers are persuaded that they are 'overhearing', or 'eavesdropping on', the dialogue between John and Edith.

ii) Other reporting verbs.

The significance of the reporting verbs 'murmured' and 'muttered' will be discussed below; readers on occasion encounter even less frequent attributions in all the novels under consideration here. In *Brothers and Sisters* the despotic Sophia Stace, who loves her husband deeply, nonetheless cannot control herself when she feels he is not telling her what she wants to know:

“What is the matter, Christian? Do you mean something you are not saying? Oh, I do hate that habit of yours. Come into the study and tell me. I knew you had something on your spirits; I have tortured myself about it for weeks. Only I was afraid to speak of it. What is it?” (*Brothers and Sisters*, 119-20)

This forceful speech is not interrupted, nor immediately followed, by its attribution: it is reported only on the following line: 'Sophia's voice rose towards a shriek' (*ibid.*). On learning of her husband's death, Sophia again loses her self-control, producing a paragraph of thirteen questions interspersed with eight exclamations (though only one is marked by an exclamation point); the first two brief questions are attributed by 'she said', but readers have to wait for the following paragraph to read: 'Her voice reached a scream' (*ibid.* 135). On a later occasion readers are alerted to

Sophia's impending loss of control, provoked by her children's late return after an outing, as she loses her temper with Patty: "How rare it is to find anyone who takes things seriously!" broke out Sophia' (ibid.187-188). The forceful reporting verb, unprecedented in this novel, is soon followed by the anticipated outburst from Sophia when Patty receives a telegram from the children; this time Sophia's speech is reported directly by the verb *to shriek*, supported by a graphic extension: "Oh, what is it? What is it?" she shrieked, raising her hands to her head' (ibid.189). These four exceptional uses exemplify Sophia's extreme frustration when she is thwarted in her desire to 'know all there is to know' about her family, and thus to control them. The three instances of *shriek/scream* are increasingly vehement: the first speech is relatively short, and Sophia's voice 'rose towards' a shriek; the second is longer and more dramatic, and the voice 'reached' a scream; in the third instance Sophia's words are reported directly, and the reporting verb is supported by an evocative extension. Considered together, these three exceptional uses of such strong verbs, compounded by the inclusion of *broke out*, reveal Sophia's mental fragility with regard to her family, thus perhaps generating in the reader a degree of sympathy which might otherwise be lacking.

*A House and its Head* and *A Family and a Fortune* will serve to illustrate further such usages. Dulcia Bode 'calls' (*A House and its Head* 65) and 'cries' (ibid. 64, 116, 123) when being tactless and strident, but 'whispers' (ibid.176, 213), 'breathes' (ibid.98, 184, 218), 'suggests' (ibid.p.172), and 'half says to herself' (ibid.91) her malicious gossip. Sibyl, another unsympathetic character, similarly 'calls' (ibid.76), and 'cries' (ibid.103), to attract her father's attention, having already 'cried', bursting into tears, to deny Grant's accusation of insincerity (ibid.95). The downtrodden Ellen Edgeworth, on the other hand, nervously 'advanced' (ibid.6) an

opinion to her husband, and makes sure he ‘was assured’ of his children’s gratitude (ibid.6), whilst Duncan himself scarcely feels the need to exert himself when speaking to his wife: he ‘just uttered’ his response (ibid.6); he ‘resumes’(ibid.8) his speech after the company has been distracted by Grant’s flippancy, thus effectively ignoring Grant’s comment, and ‘went on’ (ibid.10) with his attempt to quell his elder daughter. In *A Family and a Fortune* the somewhat ineffectual Blanche is forced to ‘repeat’ what she has already said (*A Family and a Fortune*, 21), and ‘almost screamed’ in her frustration caused by her inability to prevent her elder sons from teasing her precious youngest (ibid.32); in Chapter 5, having fallen ill, she for once becomes the centre of attention and, seeking to prolong the experience, she ‘continued’ her speech, ‘her eyes following this divergence of interest from herself’ (ibid. 154). On her deathbed she is unable to do more than ‘echo’ her son’s words as he tells her to rest (ibid.164).

The infrequency of reporting verbs other than *to say* inevitably engages readers’ attention when they occur, leading to a realisation of their significance: in every case the attribution makes clear that the utterance(s) reported reveals the intention and/or the state of mind of the speaker; once again further intervention from the narrator is unnecessary, but Compton-Burnett nonetheless achieves a powerful effect.

### iii) *Sotto voce* conversation, including power relationships

*Sotto voce* conversations are a feature of Compton-Burnett novels. On occasion there is no indication at the beginning of a conversation that it is *sotto voce*: in *A Family and a Fortune*, Mark, hearing his aunt repeatedly but insincerely address his mother as ‘dear’, asks a sardonic question, attributed by ‘said Mark’: ‘Would it be better if

Mother and Aunt Mattie did not address each other in terms of affection?’ (*A Family and a Fortune*, 78). He, Justine, Clement, Aubrey, and Dudley then hold a lengthy conversation (of twelve utterances) and it is only when ‘Edgar’s eyes rested on his daughter’ (ibid.79) and Aubrey hastens to retrieve the situation by asking his aunt a direct question, that readers become aware that the five have been talking amongst themselves.

In Compton-Burnett’s work the verb ‘to say’ can itself be modified in several ways, for example, by the inclusion of the name of the addressee; this device can indicate that the speaker does not want all the others present to hear, and often the response can be unheard by some of them. In *Men and Wives*, for example, we find Matthew asking his father, who has come in unexpectedly with Dominic Spong at an inopportune moment, “‘Why have you come in at once like this?’” said Matthew to his father’ (*Men and Wives*,149), a question clearly not meant to be heard by Spong. (On this occasion, however, the speaker’s voice appears to have been louder than he had intended, as Spong responded.) In *Daughters and Sons*, Rowland is concerned about what the Ponsonby children will have to face on their arrival home: “‘Will they not be afraid to go home?’” said Rowland to his son, in desire to know’ (*Daughters and Sons*, 88). Evelyn answers his father, then the conversation continues from the remark which precedes Rowland’s question. In *Pastors and Masters* too, the inclusion of a name indicates a remark intended for the ears of one or two people only: Emily Herrick makes a sarcastic remark about a possible marriage between Francis Fletcher and Miss Basden, reported by ‘said Emily to Theresa’ (*Pastors and Masters* 89). Theresa responds, followed by Bumpus, who has clearly heard Emily’s comment; however, there are six exchanges, all except the first reported simply by ‘said’ and referring to Nicholas and Merry in addition to Miss Basden and Francis,

before Mr. Merry demonstrates that he has not heard the asides: ‘Where is my wife?’ (ibid. 90). It is clear in these cases that not all the company hears the exchanges, and the speech is either unreported or reported by ‘said’. In *A Family and a Fortune* also, on the arrival of Oliver, the children’s grandfather, Dudley, Mark, and Clement engage in an ironic three-way conversation (of five utterances, the first attributed by ‘said Dudley to Mark’ (*A Family and a Fortune* 69)), and the fourth simply by ‘said Clement’ (ibid.) about the habits of old people; the previous utterance is Oliver’s and the subsequent one Justine’s, in direct response to her grandfather’s.

The use of verbal periphrases – Liddell’s ‘stage directions’ – enhances what Burkhart has labelled the ‘dramatic’ nature of Compton-Burnett’s dialogue. Expressions such as those quoted below (*Daughters and Sons*, 9, *A House and its Head*, 91, and *A House and its Head*, 192 twice), which again indicate that the speaker does not wish all of those present to hear the remark, are frequent; the response, if there is one, may also be unheard by the company in general. At a significant moment in *A House and its Head*, the narrative voice uses a particularly subtle and pointed indication to convince the reader of the *sotto voce* nature of Gretchen’s remarks. She has demonstrated to Duncan that Marshall has been responsible for Richard’s death; Duncan, ‘turning to the window’ (*A House and its Head*, 209) accepts Gretchen’s explanation. ‘Taking advantage of his back to direct her eyes to Sibyl’ and ‘speaking with her face close to hers’ (ibid), Gretchen makes it clear to Sibyl that she knows the whole truth (that Sibyl has paid Marshall to bring about the death of her half-brother), concluding with a warning: ‘.... if there is any danger in the future to Cassie or Cassie’s child, remember the secret will not die with an old woman’ (ibid.). Duncan has not heard Gretchen’s warning and therefore remains unaware of Sibyl’s guilt in the matter of Richard’s murder. Similarly

specific locutions are to be found in many of the novels: ‘said Victor in an undertone half-meant to be heard’ (*Daughters and Sons*, 9), the first indication of a possible *sotto voce* remark in *Daughters and Sons* (Sabine hears it); ‘said Dulcia half to herself’ (*A House and its Head*, 91), a surprising suggestion of sensitivity from this usually tactless young woman; ‘said Sibyl in a voice that could just be heard’ (*ibid.*, 192), as she tries by means of vicious hints to deflect her guilt on to Cassie; ‘said Nance under her breath’ (*ibid.*, 230), in her determination not to let her father subjugate her; ‘said Justine, in a voice so low and light as to escape her mother’s ears’ (*A Family and a Fortune*, 13), joining the rest of the family in the teasing of her mother but not wishing to hurt her feelings; such examples can also be found in other novels.

Sometimes there is an indirect indication of a *sotto voce* conversation; in *Brothers and Sisters* readers meet a long exchange reported indirectly: “‘It is absurd to say that prayer is answered’”, said Dinah, as the young people talked apart’ (*Brothers and Sisters*, 51). Her comment leads to an exchange of eight utterances (one of them quite lengthy) between six of the ‘young people’; in this instance, however, Peter, their unsympathetic uncle, seems to be eavesdropping: the ninth utterance provokes a response from him (*ibid.*, 52). In *A Family and a Fortune* readers find a brief narrative interpolation indicating further possible instances of *sotto voce* conversation. Aunt Matty speaks of the lesson she feels she has learned by comparing her own sitting room to her sister’s. Mark says – to Aubrey we assume, since it is he who replies – “‘And one which was needed, from what I hear’” (*A Family and a Fortune*, 72). (On this occasion the butt of the quiet comments hears something, but cannot distinguish the words.) The exchange, of which the reporting verbs are ‘said’, is immediately followed by the narrative voice telling readers that

‘Mark and Aubrey often talked aside to each other, Clement would join them when inclined to talk, Justine when inclined to talk aside. Aubrey also talked aside to himself’ (ibid., 72). An example of Aubrey’s ‘talking aside to himself’ occurs on the previous page; readers are treated to an ironic insight into his reaction to his aunt:

“‘Aunt Matty does not restrict the application of her words”, said Aubrey, seeming to speak to himself, as he often did when he adopted adult phrase’ (ibid., 71).

Sometimes it is only on reading one of these locutions that the reader can be sure that the conversation is *sotto voce*. In this case readers glimpse Aubrey’s self-conscious lack of confidence.

Aubrey Gaveston (*A Family and a Fortune*), sharply witty but hampered by his disabilities, is (as has been demonstrated above) another particular case. Not only is he a member, with his siblings and his uncle, of the pact against the vitriol of his aunt, but he must also strive to bolster his self-confidence and, like Almeric Bode, to establish his identity in the face of teasing by his older brothers (one kindly but the other malicious), an over-protective mother, and his somewhat suffocating sister. One of his stratagems is to try to emulate his uncle’s urbane wit, and in doing so he may be said to ‘commentate’ on the behaviour of other family members. Locutions such as ‘said aside’, ‘murmured’ and ‘muttered’ are thus particularly apposite in the reporting of Aubrey’s speech; his is the first murmur readers encounter.

The extensions listed above are modifications of the verb ‘to say’; the same formulæ can sometimes be found on the rare occasions when a different speech indicator is used. However, the onomatopoeic verbs ‘mutter’ and ‘murmur’ are usually sufficient in themselves to achieve the desired effect. As is the case with modifications of ‘say’, these verbs can indicate that a conversation is taking place between two or more people out of earshot of the others present or that the speaker is

‘murmuring’ or ‘muttering’ to him- or herself. In *Pastors and Masters*, the eccentric Miss Lydia is prone to reiterating her platitudes to herself, frequently ignored by the others present. When Emily points out that no-one can do everything entirely without help, Lydia’s pious confirmation is immediately forthcoming: ““No. Not without help, no. Without always asking help, perhaps,” murmured Miss Lydia. “For we can’t do things without help, no”” (*Pastors and Masters*, 28). Similarly, in a brief conversation about her dead nephews, another sanctimonious remark is heard – and ignored: ““It is the valuable lives that must be used,” murmured Miss Lydia. “That is why they are so precious. Ah! How precious they were!”” (ibid.87). Thus Lydia Fletcher’s self-righteousness is emphasised, as is her place amongst the members of her circle.

Such reporting verbs are apt in the case of Almeric Bode (*A House and its Head*). Almeric, a young member of the Edgeworths’ social circle who is a minor character but an instrument in the development of the plot, is one who frequently murmurs or mutters, the latter verb carrying the less pleasant implication; Almeric’s first utterance is ‘muttered’ (*A House and its Head* 27). It is fair to say that he rarely ‘says’ anything – muttering and murmuring appear to be his preferred modes of speech: the reader is soon aware of the disposition of this sensitive and unhappy young man, constantly seeking to define himself against the background of his overbearing sister. On occasion he is sarcastic too at the expense of the ‘spinsters of this parish’, Beatrice Fellowes and her cousin Rosamund. The former has been explaining her ‘little mission’ to the assembled company (to take to all her friends ‘the simple message of Christmas’(ibid.30)): ““I wonder why evangelists always use words like ‘just’ and ‘simple’ and ‘little’ to refer to their business”, said Almeric in a mutter to Grant. “It hardly seems for them to deprecate it””(ibid., 30). Nance

overhears and ‘murmurs’ her response: “‘A poor thing but their own’” (ibid., 30). However, most of Almeric’s *sotto voce* comments, only some of which are audible to his sister, are at her expense, as he mockingly attempts to puncture her boundless complacency and mitigate her crass behaviour. Aware of their friends’ opinion of her, his derision is an attempt to distance himself from her and to establish a distinct identity. His sarcasm betrays his self-conscious embarrassment at Dulcia’s bumptiousness, yet family loyalty prevents him from openly attacking her.

*Sotto voce* remarks and conversations, whether reported by ‘said’, ‘murmured’, or ‘muttered’, frequently indicate a bond between two or more of the oppressed or marginalised characters, which is their principal defence against the tyrant on whom they depend. This is true of Nance and Grant (*A House and its Head*); both are the victims of Duncan’s bullying, and Grant’s position as heir (but not son) is insecure. He is the first in *A House and its Head* whose speech is attributed by the verb ‘to murmur’: “‘How untrue!’” murmured Grant. “As if more strength than he [Duncan] has, is possible!” (*A House and its Head*, 10). Since no response is forthcoming, the reader is not sure who, if anyone, has heard the exclamation, but assumes either that Grant intends that Nance should hear and Duncan should not, or that he (Grant) is ‘murmuring’ to himself. The remark points to Grant’s dry humour as his principal weapon in his attempts to safeguard his limited autonomy in the face of his dependence on Duncan. Shortly after, when Gretchen insists on taking her daughter home because ‘we must have some family life on Christmas Day’ (ibid.17), Grant, only too aware of the impending ‘celebration’ of the Edgeworth family, murmurs, ‘It seems we must’; though Gretchen, a friend of the family sympathetic to the ‘children’, hears – she smiles ‘with grim understanding’ – Duncan clearly does not (ibid., 17). Grant and Nance furnish several such exchanges; thus not only what is

said and who says it but also *how* it is said contribute to readers' awareness of the bond between the murmurers and its importance amid the general unease and mistrust prevailing in the household.

The mutual support of the Ponsonby offspring (*Daughters and Sons*) is also expressed in low voices, as they present a united front against emotional abuse at the hands of their grandmother and aunt. Readers do not have to wait long before the older siblings demonstrate their pact: Sabine asks Chilton to help with some gardening, which causes him to engage in his usual teasing of his brother: "Victor, grandma does not ask your help", said Chilton. "Have you asked yourself the reason?" "Clearly, nothing would have stopped her", murmured France' (*Daughters and Sons*, 32). Chilton frequently teases Victor openly, but on this occasion the preceding and following utterances reveal that neither Sabine nor Clare, who is also present, has heard the exchange. Later, when Hetta remonstrates with Muriel for listening to adult conversation, we read the following: "There is no other talk for her to listen to", said Clare. "I could not resist listening to it myself", said France. "I suppose it to be quite unique". "Don't whisper, don't whisper," said Hetta' (*ibid.* 60). Shortly after, when Sabine says that she has 'seldom felt the want' of education, the following exchange is heard:

"Other people have done that," said Chilton to France. "No educated person would dare as she has dared."

"People's disadvantages generally fall on other people" (*ibid.* 63).

Hetta again says, "Don't whisper, don't whisper" (*ibid.* 63). That their whispers are heard fails to persuade the siblings to stop their *sotto voce* comments, thus demonstrating the strength of their antipathy to their aunt and grandmother.

Similarly, though the burden of oppression borne by the Gaveston siblings in *A Family and a Fortune* is less onerous than for the Edgeworths and the Ponsonbys, they unite, with the support of their uncle, against the emotional despotism their aunt attempts to exercise. Their united front against Aunt Matty is clear in Chapter 9; the family has been told by Matty that Miss Griffin, her abused companion, has gone out on this freezing night ‘without hat or coat or anything’ (*A Family and a Fortune*, 248). Clement asks his brother,

“‘Did she [Miss Griffin] wander in the garden without hat or coat in this weather?’”

“Take care; aunt Matty must have driven her out,” said Mark. “And she did not wait to be called back, but went on her own way. And if she freezes or starves or dies of exposure, and it seems she must do all those things, she will be better off than she has been.” (ibid. 248)

Neither Clement’s question nor Mark’s response to it would be uttered in a voice that could be heard by his aunt, nor would there be any need for Mark’s warning to Clement to lower his voice; further, there is no direct response to his description of Miss Griffin’s possible plight, Justine simply asking her aunt if Miss Griffin had any money: readers suspect that Mark’s dramatic description has not been heard – and wonder whether it has even been uttered, rather than simply thought, by Mark. A few moments later Maria dares to imply that Matty might not be entirely right in her summing-up of the situation, causing Justine to ‘whisper’, “Maria, it is a great feat of courage ... and I honour you for it. But is it wise? And is it not an occasion when indulgence must be extended?” (ibid., 249) (Matty’s father has just died). Maria’s

reply is unequivocal: “Your aunt had not lost her father when she turned Miss Griffin out of doors” (ibid., 249). Justine’s rejoinder is uttered ‘in a voice that could be heard’; clearly her previous remark, and Maria’s response, have been *sotto voce*. Matty ignores Maria’s added criticism – and indeed the original one.

*Sotto voce* conversation requires the reader to ‘listen’ closely and to draw inferences from the vocal tone, which in Compton-Burnett’s case may be indicated by the reporting verb and also suggested by an extended attribution; thus the need for further narrative intervention is reduced. All such conversations demand readers’ attention; where there is a response, and where an addressee is named, it is clear that the utterances are in fact communicative. However, readers cannot be sure in every case that speech takes place. Significant also is that whilst Grant and Nance may murmur to each other and Almeric and Aubrey to no-one in particular, all privilege the reader, the invisible listener to the murmured comments. All such attributive verbs and verbal periphrases afford further insights into the workings of characters’ minds, soliciting readers’ sympathy with the ‘murmurers’ in their position of dependence and with their doubts and uncertainties. Readers are further invited to be complicit in the deflationary wit that is often the content of the murmured comments, which serve as weapons in their rebellions against the dominant characters or as supports in alliances with fellow-victims. The suggestion as to the audibility or otherwise of some utterances, and indeed even the possibility that they may not be ‘uttered’ at all, gives rise to the notion of the use of the dramatic device of the chorus (see section e) below).

iv) The voices of the powerful and the weak

The above discussion of speech presentation and those which follow, of thought presentation and extended attributions, amply demonstrate that these elements play a significant part in the mode of speech of Compton-Burnett's characters and in the depiction of relationships between them. The speech of the tyrants, unlike that of the oppressed, is never murmured or muttered, never said aside, to themselves, or under their breath; and only rarely do they reveal their private thoughts. Speech is the weapon they use in the exercise of their control, and it is most often presented in Free Direct Speech or by the attributive verb 'said' (see note above, p.41). The occasional departure from this indication expresses the power which the speakers exercise over their victims or their utter conviction of their own superiority: Sabine's and Hetta's hisses, Sophia Stace's shrieks and screams, all intensify the dread felt by their hearers; they have been discussed under the heading 'Other Reporting Verbs'.

These characters do not engage in *sotto voce* conversations: they speak out loud, unequivocally and with assurance. Duncan Edgeworth, Matty Seaton, Hetta and Sabine Ponsonby, Josephine Napier, Sophia Stace – all are confident of their right to say exactly what they want to say, how, and to whom. The speech of what may be termed 'strong-minded' characters is presented in a similarly revealing way; those such as Cassie and Gretchen Jekyll, Maria Sloane and Edith Haslam, who may in some cases be financially dependent, nevertheless are of sufficient strength of character to stand up to the oppressors and are respected by them; they speak openly and straightforwardly. Edith Haslam, the successor to Miss Bunyan, is very different from her predecessor. A woman of independent spirit who does not resort to muttered or murmured comments, she gains the respect of the Ponsonby children and marries their father – albeit as a result of a misunderstanding on his part; when he

learns of his mistake, he is still content with his wife, having come to respect and value her. However, perhaps the strongest ‘governess’ is Cassandra Jekyll (*A House and its Head*). When the children no longer need her services as teacher, she becomes their companion and confidante and Ellen’s right hand in the running of the house. Though an ally of the ‘children’ and a witness to his first wife’s subservience, she retains sufficient respect for Duncan eventually to marry him, explaining her reasons to Nance with her usual common sense: ‘I want a provision for my future... And I have lived with your father for twenty years. It is not remarkable that I can spend some more with him’ (*A House and its Head*, 169). Her strength of character elicits reciprocal respect from Duncan, who recognises also that she is the social equal of the Edgeworths and always treats her as such: ‘Cassie was a well-born woman, and held her own in his house, and his treatment of her was in accordance with his traditions’ (ibid. 26). She speaks straightforwardly throughout: on the occasion of Richard’s christening, hearing Mrs. Bode refer to Nance’s christening ‘as if it were yesterday’, she responds, ‘People who remember things, always remember them as if they were yesterday... I remember it as if it were twenty-six years ago’ (ibid. 133). Beatrice Fellowes is moved to comment: ‘Miss Jekyll’s simple unflinchingness!’ (ibid.). Another strong and intelligent second wife (Cassie is in fact Duncan’s third) is Maria Sloane in *A Family and a Fortune*. Maria speaks wisely and openly to all around her, and readers are convinced that she will be able to run the Gaveston household, deal sensitively with the ‘children’ and her husband and brother-in-law, and keep Matty in check, much more successfully than could Blanche.

Amongst other strong characters who do not indulge in subversive mutterings, one of the most notable is perhaps Alison (*A House and its Head*), Duncan’s second

wife, who makes no bones about defying her husband both verbally and in her behaviour, going so far as to allow herself to be seduced by Grant soon after her arrival in the household. Clearly, such a character cannot accommodate herself to life in the Edgeworth family: she absconds with Almeric (thus providing an ironically melodramatic escape for the world-weary young man). Similarly, the flighty Camilla, in *Men and Wives*, is simply too extravagant a character to be contained within one of Compton-Burnett's ultra-conservative landed families. She does not need any allies; she murmurs knowingly, for sport, at the expense of the gullible Sir Godfrey. In the midst of his amorous advances, he professes himself "drained by what I have had to give, and have given so willingly": "I know you would give a great deal", murmured Camilla. "I can feel you would" (*Men and Wives* 268). After a few more minutes of being 'bamboozled' by Camilla, Sir Godfrey is led to claim "I believe I am a man who knows what is welcome to a woman, what is acceptable in her sight. I have had little chance to show the man I could be" (*ibid.*). Camilla can contain herself no longer: "Better late than never! Never too late to mend! Never too old to learn!" chanted Camilla, pirouetting across the room' (*ibid.*). The sequence 'murmured' – 'chanted' and the descriptive participle 'pirouetting', preceded and followed by Compton-Burnett's usual mechanisms for reported speech, together with Sir Godfrey's exaggerated professions of love, strongly emphasise Camilla's campiness and Sir Godfrey's buffoonery.

Nor do the most vulnerable of the victims mutter or murmur. If Ellen Edgeworth (and to a lesser extent Blanche Gaveston) were strong (or articulate) enough to withstand the bullying of their oppressors and retain some semblance of self-worth, they would be able to seek alliances with their fellow-victims in *sotto voce* conversations and to engage in the expression of subversive thoughts. Matty's treatment of Miss Griffin

has been demonstrated above; so extreme is Matty's bullying that readers are not surprised by the frequent lack of any attribution at all in the case of Miss Griffin's utterances; what is surprising is her courage in uttering them at all. On one occasion, after being subjected to a tirade from her employer, Miss Griffin attempts to defend herself: 'I only said....' (*A Family and a Fortune*, 203), but her speech is unattributed; a few minutes later Matty has not forgiven her, speaking to her companion 'in such a light and expressionless tone that she might almost not have spoken' (*ibid.* 204), but nonetheless dismissing her from the room; this time Miss Griffin does not dare speak, but leaves the room 'with her face fallen and a step slow enough to cover her obedience to a command' (*ibid.*). Even in response to a remark from the kindly Dudley, her ally ('I thought you did everything for Miss Seaton'), 'Miss Griffin looked aside' (*ibid.* 207), whilst shortly afterwards there is no indication at all of a response to Matty's spiteful command, the necessity for obedience from Miss Griffin being pre-empted by Dudley's swift action (*ibid.* 209).

The speech and behaviour of the hapless Miss Bunyan, one of Compton-Burnett's unfortunate governesses, illustrates the unhappy situation in which such women found themselves: she is obliged to respond to her employer, and at a normal volume. Having followed her pupil in a yawn and heard Sabine's scolding, readers learn that 'Miss Bunyan again and waveringly put her hand to her mouth'. Her statement that "it is amazing how infectious yawning is" is attributed by 'she said, her manner less amazed than uneasy' (*Daughters and Sons*, 34). Readers are not surprised by her uneasiness: they already share her fear of Sabine's responses. When, a few moments later she dares to admit tiredness (having been chided by Sabine for staying up late to write letters), readers, like the narrator, feel that she must be 'possibly dazed by weariness' (*ibid.* 35); otherwise she would not have been so foolhardy as to make such an admission. When

she becomes aware of the significance of Sabine's comments about letter-writing in the evening, she speaks 'with a change of manner' (ibid.), apparently remembering her position. Her awareness of her position is reinforced shortly after: Sabine offers her a second egg, since, she explains, Miss Bunyan will not be taking dinner with the family this evening; on Miss Bunyan's refusal, Sabine uses her knowledge of the governess's stock of biscuits to goad her: "You will not sleep if you are hungry, and I don't suppose your stock of biscuits is proof against too frequent inroads" (ibid. 35). Miss Bunyan's response and its extended attribution illustrate the governess's precarious position:

"Thank you, Mrs Ponsonby, then I will have another", said Miss Bunyan, with pleasant ease and a slow flush which contradicted it' (ibid.). She has been informed, only indirectly and not long before the event, that she will not be dining, and mocked about her healthy appetite, yet she must maintain an acceptable standard of behaviour. However, her flush reveals her feelings. Readers who have enjoyed the ironic humour of the first two extended attributions quoted above are now beginning to be uncomfortably aware of, and sympathetic to, Miss Bunyan's plight. None of the above needs, or is able, to engage in *sotto voce* conversations. Those who do are the dependents who fight to maintain their sense of self-worth, indeed, their sense of self, in the face of callousness and tyranny. They are as financially dependent as Ellen, Blanche, Miss Griffin and Miss Bunyan, and as emotionally and psychologically abused, but their intelligence and strength of mind enable them to use what strength they have in order to resist complete defeat. Amongst these characters are Nance and Grant Edgeworth (Sibyl uses other means of survival whilst nonetheless on occasion colluding with her sister and her cousin), and the Ponsonby, Stace, Haslam, and to a lesser extent the Gaveston, children; some of their muffled utterances are listed above. The position of both Almeric Bode, trying to escape not a tyrant but rather his overbearing and embarrassing sister (and his unhappy situation in general), and that of

Aubrey Gaveston, seeking in essence to grow up and establish his place in the family, have already been discussed; the fortunate Sir Godfrey Haslam is immune to his wife's emotional blackmail, of which in any case he is not the target; it is the eldest son, the 'muttering' Matthew (*Men and Wives* 140), who takes extreme measures in order to escape his mother's impossible demands.

Compton-Burnett's subtle techniques of speech presentation play a significant part in reinforcing what is communicated in the dialogue itself. The defensive alliances of the abused (such as Grant and Nance Edgeworth and the Ponsonby siblings), foregrounded by these techniques, enable their survival; the inability of the weaker amongst them – Ellen and Blanche, for example – to survive their situation is demonstrated by their failure to form such alliances and is revealed by their verbal incompetence. In all cases, readers' sympathy is powerfully enlisted on their behalf.

As is clear from the above discussions, despite the relative lack of narrative and description Compton-Burnett has succeeded in offering considerable insights into her characters and the relationships between them by her varied periphrases involving the verb 'to say' and the verbs 'to mutter' and 'to murmur'. The purported absence of the narrative voice, however, continues to be at issue: *Sotto voce* conversation requires the reader to 'listen' closely and to draw inferences from the vocal tone, which in Compton-Burnett's case is powerfully suggested by the reporting verb and its attributions. All such conversations demand readers' close attention; where there is a response, and where an addressee is named, it is clear that the utterances are in fact communicative. There are, however, many occasions on which readers cannot be so confident.

**d) Presentation of Thought** (*see Introduction, p.30; p. 35*)

Readers are struck by the absence of verbs of thinking in Compton-Burnett's novels; it will become clear in this section (and has already been signalled in the previous section) that considerable reader participation is required to draw inferences in order to determine whether 'utterances' are voiced or not. The unequivocal presentation of the speech of the bullies and tyrants has received comment earlier; direct access to their thoughts is almost never provided. This is not to suggest, however, that the narrator does not express the thoughts of his/her other characters. In a consideration of Compton-Burnett's technique of thought presentation, it is pertinent to bear in mind Sarraute's reflections on sub-conversation – the 'subterranean movements' in which speech is inevitably enmeshed (Sarraute, 109; see p. 8??? above).

In the traditional linear novel the presentation of characters' thoughts, whether by Free Direct Thought, Direct Thought, Indirect Thought, Free Indirect Thought, or Narrative Report of a Thought Act, is based on the premise of the omniscient narrator, who can enter the characters' minds. (These terms are discussed in Leech and Short (2007), and in Wales (2014)). In the case of some of Compton-Burnett's contemporaries, it is the stream-of-consciousness technique which transmits thought. Compton-Burnett also is at pains to offer insight into her characters' thoughts; she does not, however, allow the narrative voice either of these privileges. The articulation of speech and thought in her work ranges across a spectrum from Direct and Free Direct Speech to what readers are clearly informed is thought; between the two extremes there are indications which require readers' active participation to interpret the narrator's intention in this regard.

In the above section on speech presentation some of the attributed *sotto voce* utterances quoted are clearly spoken: there is at least one response to the initial comment, demonstrating that the utterance has been heard. This is true also of some of the unattributed *sotto voce* utterances quoted. However, there are numerous instances of Free Direct Speech and of utterances attributed by ‘murmured’, ‘muttered’, ‘said aside’, etc., some of which have been quoted above (*A House and its Head*, 10; *Pastors and Masters*, 28, 87; *A Family and a Fortune*, 71, 245, 248) to which no response is forthcoming: the uncertainty in the mind of the reader as to whether some utterances are actually heard can therefore be difficult to resolve, thus suggesting to readers the possibility of a choric voice. Moreover, it generates a second question: are such remarks actually uttered? That some utterances, merely suggested or apparently attributed by a verb of speaking, might in fact be ‘thought’ is supported on occasion by definite indications. At least two of Aubrey Gaveston’s ‘remarks’ clearly fall into the category of thought; in the first example, Aubrey, provoked by his brothers and asked by Justine when he was going ‘to show [his] face’, responds with silence: ‘Aubrey did not reply that this would be when he found the courage’ (*A Family and a Fortune*, 188), an exceptional usage of Indirect Thought. Secondly, in response to a shocked question from Justine (‘What makes you talk like that?’ (*ibid.*, 261)), readers find “Excess of feeling and a wish to disguise it”, said Aubrey, but not aloud’ (*ibid.*, 261): a highly original method of reporting Direct Thought. Early in *Men and Wives*, to her ‘harrowing old mother’s’ injunction ‘Don’t think of me. Be happy’ (*Men and Wives*, 11), ‘Griselda gave a response with her lips that did not develop into sound’ (*ibid.*, 11); in this case, what might at first appear to be another means of expressing thought is no such thing. Readers do not discover what Griselda thought; the sentence is simply a narrative one, and readers must select from a variety of possible inferences. A little later, her

father bids his favourite son farewell, uttering ‘these last words in a tone too low to be heard’ (ibid., 15); on this occasion Sir Godfrey’s farewell and blessing are reported by ‘said’; it is only at the beginning of the following paragraph that the modification is provided, yet another unconventional method of attributing thought. On the same page the butler Buttermere surprises his master ‘in audible soliloquy’ (ibid., 15): Sir Godfrey, a prosperous man of ‘contented spirit’ (ibid., 6), ‘threw back his head and laid hold of the lapels of his coat, and walked about, swishing his feet on the carpet and breaking into snatches of talk and song’ (ibid., 15); what fills the intervals between the ‘snatches’ is not reported. The claim that these apparent utterances are a form of ‘internal speech’, in other words thought (but voiced), is incontrovertible. By appearing to afford readers insight into her characters’ minds but blurring the distinction between thought and speech, Compton-Burnett emphasises the proximity of the conscious and the unconscious, which is one of Sarraute’s concerns, and which is suggestive of the Modernist ‘stream of consciousness’ approach.

This point is forcefully made by Kiernan, who, in his analysis of some of the dialogue in *More Women than Men*, claims that ‘Other characters [than Josephine Napier] speak without fear of consequence the sort of thing that is generally thought unsayable – the sort of thing that belongs to unconscious awareness inasmuch as it seems anterior to the censoring function of the superego’ (Kiernan, 129). He suggests that ‘a number of ... subtexts seem to displace surface texts that are effectively lost to the reader...’ (ibid., 131). To support his suggestion he cites Felix Bacon’s speech of thanks for his wedding gift, in which Felix asserts that the gift is more meaningful than good wishes. Kiernan continues: ‘Or so he is *said* to announce ... readers may suspect that they have read what Felix would have liked to say rather than the words

actually uttered ...' (ibid., 131). Kiernan finds further possible instances of such displaced surface texts in the conversations not only between Felix and Josephine but also in those between members of staff: '... a subtextual reading of their conversation suggests barbed irony and bitterness as the truer locution' (ibid., 131).

Liddell too is aware of Sarraute's 'subterranean movements' in Compton-Burnett's dialogue, though he pre-dates her; he quotes a remark by Sir Rowland Seymour about the Ponsonby children: "What I can't understand about that family, ... is how they say what they like all the time, and yet seem to be frightened. Can anyone explain it?" (*Daughters and Sons*, 91). Liddell interprets this instance of Sir Rowland's calling upon his hearers to respond as 'a warning that we are not to take too many of the speeches as being silent thoughts' (Liddell, 100); and indeed, seeing the same indicative verb as is used for speech presentation, the reader might at first assume that speech is intended on every occasion. Such an assumption might well be made, for example, when the reader hears Grant's first murmured comment: "How untrue", murmured Grant....' (*A House and its Head*, 10). However, no response is forthcoming, even from Nance, Grant's ally and herself a virtuoso of *sotto voce* comments; the possibility of thought rather than speech cannot be ignored.

Elsewhere in this novel, Almeric makes a satirical comment after his sister has expressed the hope that she 'has not committed the unpardonable sin': "Hope springs eternal ...," muttered Almeric ...' (ibid., 65, 66). The general conversation continues without any reference to Almeric's comment. Neither does Aubrey (*A Family and a Fortune*) always elicit a response to his murmurings: "Justine now shows tact", murmured Aubrey' (*A Family and a Fortune*, 13). Again none of those present responds. In *Daughters and Sons* Sabine demonstrates her ruthless control over her new 'companion', Alfred, provoking the following: "Of course, Alfred will

have a breakdown”, murmured Evelyn, while his father silently regarded Sabine’ (*Daughters and Sons*, 87). The fact that Clare, who is usually more than willing to offer acerbic comment on her aunt and her grandmother, ignores Evelyn’s ‘remark’ once again opens the possibility of thought rather than speech as Evelyn’s intention.

Kiernan follows his exploration of *More Women than Men* with a discussion of *Daughters and Sons*. Influenced perhaps by Sir Rowland’s comment (and question) about the Ponsonby family, he claims that ‘Conspicuously absent... is Compton-Burnett’s characteristic displacement of surface texts with subtexts. Indeed, characters speak their entire thoughts in *Daughters and Sons* without significant recourse to subterfuge, only to lowered tones of voice’ (Kiernan, 135-136). A careful reading of this novel, however, suggests that whilst ‘subconversation’ may be in play less frequently than in some of the other novels, it is not entirely absent. Many of Clare Ponsonby’s barbed *sotto voce* comments generate a response; others, however, do not, thus causing readers to wonder if they have been heard (or uttered). The episode of Miss Bunyan’s dismissal also illustrates the possibility of doubt in readers’ minds. Sabine is unwilling to listen to Miss Bunyan’s reasons for leaving (Miss Bunyan does not succeed in expressing them) causing the latter ‘to stare in front of her, as the extent of her responsibility was brought home’ (*Daughters and Sons*, 54). Clare’s first murmur (‘What is the good of Miss Bunyan’s leaving, if she must meet the same treatment everywhere?’ (ibid., 54), apparently addressed to Sabine, receives no response, being followed immediately by Miss Bunyan’s rejoinder to Sabine’s remark. Clare’s next utterance, attributed by ‘said’, is clearly addressed to the company at large, and elicits ‘a genuine laugh’ from Sabine: ‘What she wanted to give Grandma ... is better passed over, as Grandma passed over it’ (ibid. 55). A moment later, however, Clare resumes her *sotto voce* comments; in

response to her father's observation that there is no need to worry about Miss Bunyan, as she has 'several homes', Clare mutters, 'Certainly not, in that case ... It would be absurd in us. But I wish one of the homes was not here' (ibid., 56). Clare is then asked if she would like to teach Muriel, to which she replies openly. Since Clare does not usually hesitate to speak openly, as Sir Rowland points out with regard to the whole family, readers are tempted to view those *sotto voce* comments which receive no response not only as unheard but also as perhaps unspoken – and therefore thought.

The incidence of devices such as 'said aside', 'in a low voice', 'muttered' and 'murmured' which pass without response and after which the conversation continues from the remark before the putative thought is so frequent that readers are compelled to question Liddell's warning and wonder whether indeed thought, rather than speech, is being presented. The inference is strengthened by the absence of attributive verbs of thinking. Despite his earlier warning, Liddell himself acknowledges the possibility that 'many speeches, not specifically described as silent, may be unheard ...' (Liddell, 103). Sarraute, explaining why Compton-Burnett's 'long stilted sentences' are not 'spurious or gratuitous', says this:

The reason for this is that they are located not in an imaginary place, but in a place that actually exists: somewhere on the fluctuating frontier that separates conversation from sub-conversation. Here the inner movements, of which the dialogue is merely the outcome and as it were the furthestmost point .... try to extend their action into the dialogue itself. (Sarraute 119)

Two examples of Narrative Report of Thought Act (NRTA) (see Wales 2014) are noted in the paragraph describing Oscar Jekyll (*A House and its Head*, 16) (See Part One, a)). A further cogent example of the device, rare in Compton-Burnett's work, is to be found in *A Family and a Fortune*: Maria has been expressing to her friend Matty her misgivings about her (Maria's) approaching marriage; the paragraph which follows gives Matty's response to Maria's concerns: 'Matty regarded her friend in silence. So she did not disguise her own conception of the change. Her simplicity came to her aid. She saw and accepted her place' (*A Family and a Fortune*, 210). There can be no doubt that the 'she' of the second sentence refers to Maria, following as it does Maria's expression of her concerns. Moreover, Matty is not about to undergo a change, nor could she ever be said to possess the slightest suspicion of 'simplicity'; finally, her 'place' is precisely what Matty has never seen, let alone accepted. The egregious use of NRTA, introduced by 'so' as the only hint, is yet another example of Compton-Burnett's apparently distanced narrative stance; the intervention of the narrative voice as a bridging device between Maria's concerns and Matty's realisation of them is thus avoided, yet the NRTA enables readers to perceive not only Maria's thinking but also Matty's understanding of it. Matty's penetration of her friend's thoughts is preceded by her looking at Maria ('Matty regarded ...'). By her 'look' she is enabled to apprehend Maria's state of mind. The abandonment of the neutral position by the usual narrator and the transfer of focalization to Matty enables readers better to accept the wisdom that Matty has claimed for her friend, and has revealed Matty's genuine concern for Maria, unexpected in this previously unsympathetic character: thus it has had the effect of giving 'the illusion of depth to character' (Warhol, 22; Dussinger, 97-115).

Liddell quotes as a powerful example of speech ‘which may be unheard’ an exchange between Robin Stace and his mother Sophia:

“Do take your hands out of your pockets, Robin”, said Sophia. “I told you that just now. Can’t you find something to occupy them? Or must you stand about all the evening because other people are in trouble?” [That is certainly ordinary, audible speech.]

“Yes, of course I must be about at people’s service, when things are amiss, and they might have a use for me”, said Robin [and clearly this is speech of a very different sort.] “I hope you will do the same when you get down to Father. To do you justice, I believe you will. And I discover something to employ my hands in opening the door for you. You are doing harm up here” (Liddell 103; Liddell’s square brackets).

Unfortunately, Liddell does not explain the difference he perceives. Robin’s remarks are unnecessarily harsh, and might well be ‘muttered’, but his tone is not untypical of his conversation with his mother. Furthermore, his remarks go without response from the tyrannical and egocentric Sophia.

In Compton-Burnett’s novels thoughts are frequently presented as speeches, articulated moreover in complete and finite sentences and reported by the same verbs of speaking as speech itself; in this respect her use of *sotto voce* utterances must also be considered. It is clear to readers, on seeing one or more responses to a putatively *sotto voce* remark, that the remark has been uttered; on other occasions it is not clear whether the remark has been uttered but is left without response, whether it has not been heard, or indeed whether it has not even been articulated. The same is true on occasion of utterances attributed by ‘said’. Significantly, however, all such

‘utterances’, whether they receive a response, whether they are simply heard by another character, or whether they are better perceived as thoughts, are in fact ‘heard’ by the reader. By these means the narrative voice is apparently permitted only minimal intervention, thus creating the impression in the reader that s/he has direct access to the characters’ minds; the reader has become the characters’ confidant, enjoying the kind of access to their thoughts more often provided by the omniscient narrator or by the stream-of-consciousness technique. These strategies for speech and thought presentation also contribute greatly to the fulfilment of Sarraute’s requirements: the ‘subterranean movements’, which she believes should attend all utterances, are provided in the guise of the apparently spoken word, assisted by extended attributions.

It is in considering Compton-Burnett’s techniques of speech and thought presentation that readers realise that they have had access to her characters’ subconscious, from which they have been obliged to draw inferences bearing on the characters’ inner lives, in other words, their ‘consciousness’. This may perhaps be considered a variant of the ‘stream of consciousness’ approach, and thus a possible modernist strategy.

**e) Chorus** (*see Introduction, p. 8*)

It has been noted that the playwright has at his disposal the possibility of a chorus as guide to action and interpretation, and sometimes as supplementary narrator. Rather than a specifically identified chorus, one or two characters may ‘stand in’, offering a position outside the action from which they can align themselves with the audience in the observation of the unfolding action. V.S. Pritchett compares Compton-Burnett’s novels to drama, highlighting what he perceives as an important aspect of

her work: ‘There is above all the strong element of her chorus’ (cited in Burkhart, 1965, 33). The role of narrator in a novel may function similarly to that of the chorus in drama, or the writer may choose to employ a character (or characters) to replace or supplement the narrative voice. In the case of Compton-Burnett, the narrator-as-chorus is supplanted by the voices of non-family members, or indeed by a marginalised member of the family. In Liddell’s *The Novels of I Compton-Burnett* (68-76), he devotes a chapter to the novelist’s use of chorus, categorising the choric characters he identifies according to their function in the novel: The Curious, The Toadies, The Prigs, The Good Governesses, The Aloof, and The Lower Orders.

In Liddell’s observations on Compton-Burnett’s treatment of the servant ‘class’ (‘The Lower Orders’) he first points out the irony that the hierarchy ‘below stairs’ reflects that ‘above stairs’: ‘...it is only the underlings who are victimised: the upper servants, who are tyrants over them, are careful to have a very easy life’ (ibid. 83). Liddell provides brief but cogent comment on Bethia (*A House and its Head*), who takes her lead from her master, and is quite capable of deciding what is appropriate and what is not; Buttermere (*Men and Wives*), who despises Sir Godfrey Haslam, as the narrative voice makes clear in the opening two pages; and on Jellamy (*A Family and a Fortune*), who is described by Liddell as a ‘brooding’ figure, an apt description, as Blanche on more than one occasion dismisses him: ‘Send Jellamy away... He keeps on watching me’ (*A Family and a Fortune* 153). In our *Downton Abbey* era, the phenomenon of ‘upstairs/downstairs’ replication has become familiar, as has the part played by curiosity about, and commentary on, the lives of those ‘upstairs’ in the lives of their so-called inferiors. The further irony, that the latter group are not always ‘inferior’ (in intelligence) and do not perceive themselves as such despite the entrenched conviction of their masters to the contrary, is not lost on

the reader. Compton-Burnett's depiction of the relationships between masters and men is in itself a choric comment: readers are enabled, from their perceptions of these interactions, to draw inferences with regard to the prevailing social structure as well as to character and action. The relationship between employer and employed may also be said on occasion to act as agent in Compton-Burnett's subversive project; in the case of Blanche Gaveston, for example, her apprehension of Jellamy's constant 'watching' may prey upon her already delicate nervous condition, thus contributing to her illness and death.

Perhaps the most striking examples of the traditional notion of chorus are the spinsters Rosamund Burtenshaw, Beatrice Fellowes, and Dulcia Bode in *A House and its Head*, whose lives have a dual focus, the family in the Big House and, for Rosamund and Beatrice at least, the rector (see Part Two, Ch. Four). They are examined further in Part Two, Chapter Four. Their meetings with their friends and neighbours, which often take place in or around the church buildings, illustrate the extent to which the lives of all of them are dominated by the Edgeworths and the rector. As they gather to decorate the church for the harvest festival, they waste no time in embarking on their favourite topic of conversation.

'We expect a good deal of the harvest decorations', said Beatrice, from the pulpit of the church. 'They are to serve the secondary purpose of a sign of welcome [for Duncan's second wife].'

'It is no good, Beatrice; it is no good', said Dulcia. 'It is dear and noble, but I can't stay the course. I would rather put flowers on the grave of the first Mrs. Edgeworth, than pile up the church with them for the second.'

‘I think we should try to conquer that feeling’, said Beatrice, justified in her serious tone, as in herself interest and anticipation had achieved the conquest.

‘A place kept vacant can after all only be a blank’, said her cousin.

‘A blank may be sacred’, said Dulcia. ‘Shall I confess to a tiny feeling of disappointment?’ (ibid.97)

Thus Dulcia’s proclivity for spiteful gossip is signalled, as is the different focus of the cousins. The importance of the twin pivots of village life for this stratum of society is clearly implied. A few minutes later, Dulcia tries again to remind the company of the first Mrs. Edgeworth’s recent death: the approach of Gertrude Jekyll, accompanied by Nance and Sibyl, enables her to provoke from a different angle:

Here they are, the two dear, determinedly unconcerned ones...! Coming along as naturally as if it were an ordinary occasion! There is one person here who will never feel their position is different (ibid. 97)

Undeterred by a dry question from Nance, Dulcia continues her train of thought:

‘My dears, I am struck by a thought’, said Dulcia, in a low aghast aside [a typically significant Compton-Burnett extended attribution]. ‘It has come on me at this moment. They won’t have to face the last trial, to call the newcomer as they called their mother; by the simple, maternal name?’ (ibid.)

The cousins, who harbour secret dreams of matrimony, can remain pleasantly excited: the rector’s bachelorhood is not threatened by the arrival of Alison, a married woman.

Beatrice's religiosity is soon suggested. Despite having been to service on Christmas morning she is not convinced that her friends have properly received 'the simple message of Christmas'. In the afternoon therefore, she embarks on what she perceives as her mission, the delivery of the message. Her first call is on the Edgeworths: 'I have come to give you all a message, which you have already received today, the simple message of Christmas. I just want it to pass once again from me to you' (*A House and its Head*, 29). Duncan's opinion of Beatrice's visit, uttered just after she leaves, is fortunately not audible to her: 'The impertinent woman!' (ibid. 31)

Beatrice is kindly received at the Bodes' house, but much less so at the Smolletts'. Again the narrator makes Beatrice's state of mind clear: she looks at Mr. Bode 'with a sort of glow on her face' and gives 'a little, unsteady laugh' (ibid.38); at the Smolletts' her continued lack of confidence is betrayed by her 'uncertain smile' (ibid.41). It is Beatrice's visit to the Jekylls' house that is the most difficult; she must face Gretchen without the mitigating presence of Oscar. She is resolute in her determination to deliver her message, and at last, 'with her lips just moving in rehearsal of her words' (ibid.35-36), she manages to do so, persevering despite Gretchen's evident antipathy, until she has finished what she wants to say. Beatrice's round of visits illustrates the position of these members of the chorus: because of their peripheral location vis-à-vis the action, they are able to interact with all those at its centre, in this case eliciting from characters valuable reactions which contribute to readers' knowledge and understanding.

A pertinent illustration of the functioning of the chorus occurs when Sibyl Edgeworth deliberately suggests to Dulcia that Cassie and Duncan, the *de facto* parents of the dead child Richard, might be responsible for his death:

“Dulcia”, said Sibyl in a low, half weeping tone, “people always say strange things, when something happens, don’t they?”

“What is worrying you, dear?”

“If anyone should say to you that someone, that Cassie brought this about for the sake of her own child, you would not believe it? Even if they said she was not responsible as she is now? You would make a stand and deny it?”

(ibid.193)

A moment later she suggests Duncan’s guilt: ‘... Cassie creeping up to Richard’s bed; with Father behind her, creeping too ...’ (ibid.194). Sibyl knows that Dulcia will not be able to refrain from spreading the vicious rumour, and indeed Dulcia almost immediately approaches Beatrice: ‘I must be strong. I must not be led into betraying a trust...’ (ibid.196). However, she allows herself to be persuaded to share the rumour, which soon becomes the focus of discussion at the meetings of the Dorcas group. In this case the chorus has acted as the vehicle for Sibyl’s poison.

This episode demonstrates the efficiency of the choric function in village life: the rumour is later laid to rest, the arch-gossip admitting that her words had done harm, and calling for a vote of confidence in the Edgeworths. Later the tables are turned on Sibyl, when Gretchen Jekyll discovers the truth about her part in the death of Richard. She effectively blackmails Sibyl by threatening her with exposure in the event of any harm coming to Cassie’s child: she, Gertrude, will inform the ‘chorus’- or perhaps only her son? - of Sibyl’s actions before her death; see above. The chorus

appears to surround the fulcrum of protagonist-and-action, in both a monitoring and a modifying capacity.

Rosamund and Beatrice, (and to a lesser extent Dulcia) by their attention to the words, and their close observation of the behaviours, not only of the rector but also of the Edgeworth family, are enabled to offer commentary which reinforces readers' appreciation of the *mores* of the day: readers are made aware of the social hierarchy in villages such as that inhabited by the Edgeworths, of the part the Church played in the lives of upper middle class families, of the restrictions of such lives and the struggle to maintain standards, of the impending penury of the principal family, and of the often only perilously maintained equilibrium of these families. In this way Compton-Burnett's choric voices assist the novelist in her project, to subvert the status quo of this class as she perceived it to have been at the time of the settings of her novels.

Another member of the chorus in this novel is Cassandra Jekyll, a previous governess of the Edgeworth daughters who continues to live in their house as their mother's (and their) companion; Liddell labels her as one of the 'good governesses'. Her clear-eyed common sense is evident when she explains to Nance why she has accepted Duncan's proposal: 'I want a provision for my future. Oscar [her brother] must build his own life, when my mother dies. And I have lived with your father for twenty years. It is not remarkable that I can spend some more with him' (*A House and its Head* 169). Her own position, which is that of many women without income, is stated openly; implicit in her reference to Duncan is her ability to appreciate his strengths as well as his weaknesses. Cassie's wise words ease the discomfort Nance and Grant feel as they prepare to welcome Sibyl, whose return is essential to the unfolding of the plot, back into the family towards the end of the novel:

‘The wrong is never the only thing a wrong-doer has done ... That is the pathos of criminals. No class has a greater. Grant has met other things in Sibyl, and will meet them again... Sibyl has been through emotional strain, in a life in which succession had loomed too large. She never had a normal moral sense, and she was not in a normal place’ (ibid. 228).

Cassie’s observation also indicates an important aspect of life in families such as the Edgeworths: their financial insecurity and the gradual decline in their circumstances, an important theme in Compton-Burnett’s work.

A conspicuous commentator is Miss Charity Marcon (*Daughters and Sons*), only cursorily treated by Liddell. The adult and professional Marcon twins, who provide a different model of defensive pact from that of the victims of the bullies, frequently speak *sotto voce* to each other; both unmarried, they live together and are content in doing so. They safeguard the stronghold they have created around their eccentricities by sharing their humour and their perceptions of their neighbours. These characteristics are exemplified during their first appearance in the novel: “‘Jane seems to meet a high standard of physique in men”, said Stephen to his sister. “It makes her expect a great deal of them”” (*Daughters and Sons*, 82). Only Charity – and the reader – hears her brother’s detached observation on one of their neighbour’s foibles. Shortly afterwards it is Charity herself whose voice makes clear their choric function, to offer insights into, and comment on, their friends and their doings, thus assisting readers to understand them and intimating possible future developments: “‘So Alfred [their nephew] is a tutor now,” said Miss Marcon to her brother, “and people will get the best out of him. I wonder what that will be. People are always at their worst with their families, so we can’t have any idea”” (ibid. 85-6). Her musings are prescient: her understanding of the characters concerned enables her to foresee

that Alfred's behaviour in the Ponsonby family will be irreproachable – but the mention of the 'worst' that she and Stephen (Alfred's own family) have experienced with regard to their nephew, bodes ill.

Liddell quotes an abridged conversation between Charity, Sir Rowland Seymour, and his son Evelyn as they stand at the Ponsonbys' gate, desirous of hearing news of John's marriage, describing them as 'friendly vultures', and 'very good friends' of the Ponsonbys (Liddell 71). The partial conversation, and the episode which follows it, fully exemplify not only Charity's but also Rowland's and Evelyn's insatiable curiosity.

“So you are out already, Charity; you are out by yourself,” said Rowland, meeting Miss Marcon on the road leading past the Ponsonbys' gates. “You are not going into the house?”

“Yes, of course I am going in. But we can't arrive in a body to ask questions.”

“No, no, not in a body, no. But we want to ask some questions; yes, I think we do.”

“To find out about the marriage we have seen in the papers. How else are we to know about it? It is a wonderful and startling thing and fraught with bitterness for others. It may make one's own lot better by comparison”.

“Then it will really help”, said Evelyn. “But if we ask no questions, we have no lies told us. I have subtler methods of finding out the truth.”

“You mean you have subtler ways of asking questions. If you ask no questions, you have no truth told you either”. (*Daughters and Sons*, 201)

The conversation continues; readers discover that Jane (Seymour) is ‘sitting at home, waiting to hear everything’ (202) as is Stephen, who ‘does want to know the family secrets’ and has ‘a morbid curiosity about them’ (ibid.). Evelyn explains to Charity the nature of his and his father’s curiosity: ‘Our curiosity is neither morbid nor ordinary. It is the kind known as devouring’, and his father adds, ‘A good battery of direct questions... That is the way...’ (ibid.). It is well over a page later before the conversation ends and Miss Marcon ‘went on to the house’ (203). The unabashed inquisitiveness of all three characters convinces readers that they will be equally forthright in their comments on what they discover. It is not long before we see Charity, now in the house, engaged in finding out as much as possible. She asks Hetta ‘how it happened, how you arranged it’ (204); ‘How about the wedding?... Did you think it worthwhile to go?’ (204). Not only does she ask questions, she also passes comment on the answers directly to those involved; in response to Hetta’s remark that they would have found a second wedding ‘an echo of the first’, she states, ‘The children could not have found it that. They did not exist before the first’ (ibid. 204). Her remark to Muriel on the question of a new governess is even more pointed: ‘Your father can’t marry her this time, Muriel. And he generally doesn’t, does he? You often have a new one; I remember you had Miss Bunyan... Edith will be able to train the future governesses’ (ibid. 205). Hetta tells Charity that John gets ‘so fidgeted’ when she insists on talking to him ‘about children and education’, to which once again Charity is forthright in her response:

Well, do not insist on it, dear. John has married Miss Hallam to prevent it, and it would not be reasonable. What would be the good of his doing it? Has

he married her for any other reason, do you think? I know he tells you everything, so please betray his confidence... (ibid. 205-206).

Charity's persistent and pointed questions (and orders!) seize and retain readers' attention and force Hetta to explain her reasoning and justify her actions, thus enabling readers better to understand this important character.

The siblings Stephen and Charity function as aloof commentators (Liddell categorises Stephen as one of 'The Aloof'). In the case of Charity, whom Liddell describes as one of 'The Curious', however, she does more than merely comment: the impact of a 'battery of direct questions' from such a forceful character as Hetta, resulting as it does in the revelation of the latter's increasingly disturbed frame of mind, assists Compton-Burnett in her depiction of the possible psychologies of single women. In this novel three governesses are introduced; one is a figure of fun for readers whilst another, unable to deal with the advances of the vicar, soon departs. All three act as agents in furthering the author's depiction of the spinster in late Victorian and Edwardian times. They serve the purpose of illustrating what was often the fate of the unmarried woman: she becomes a governess. Edith Haslam, however, like Cassie Jekyll, is an intelligent and balanced woman; fortunately for her, though not for Hetta, she too marries her employer. Charity herself exemplifies both the plight of the single woman and the perspicacity of writers, a group, and particularly its female members, lightly ironised by Compton-Burnett. In *Men and Wives* Rachel Hardisty, on hearing that Jermyn Haslam has withdrawn his offer of marriage, says to her stepdaughter Mellicent, 'Oh, yes, the poems ... Must you really be a spinster, even though people will never understand it?' (p. 264). She has immediately – and correctly – assumed that Jermyn has withdrawn his proposal because of Mellicent's poems; the immediacy of her assumption reveals that at that time the reluctance of

men to ‘take on’ as a wife a writer, who might be considered intelligent and independently-minded, could be taken as a matter of course. The perceived unsuitability of such a marriage partner is implicit, despite the fact that their good qualities might suggest the opposite. Moreover, both Charity and Mellicent appear content in their single lives; Mellicent tells Rachel, ‘I think I am like you in one small way. Your happiest years were your single ones’ (p. 264).

Watching the Ponsonby family and the action from the outside and inseparable in their alliance, the Marcons are perfectly placed to function as ‘aloof commentators’ and thus serve as chorus; only four pages before the end their brief conversation again offers comment, and confirmation for the reader, on one of the principal characters and major aspects of the plot: Edith, a person of considerable wisdom, has supplanted Hetta as the most important woman in John’s life:

“‘Edith is silent”, said Stephen to his sister.

“It is nice of you to notice that, Stephen. You are one of those people who are human like everybody else. And you ought to understand silence.”

“She is letting Hetta hold the first place until the last.”

“You see you understand it” (ibid. 316-317).

A particularly cogent example of a choric character, though not referenced as such by Liddell, is that of Aubrey Gaveston (*A Family and a Fortune*), the lonely and disabled adolescent son of the Gaveston family, who frequently speaks (or murmurs, or simply thinks) to himself. For his frequent use of *sotto voce* utterances see Part One, section c) iii; many of these utterances offer direct comment on what Aubrey

sees and hears within the family circle. Readers find his first such comment early in the novel, as he gently mocks his sister, who likes to think that as her father's only daughter she holds a special place in his affections: "“Always father's little girl”, murmured Aubrey' (*A Family and a Fortune*, 11). When his father asks him to repeat what he has said he makes it clear that he has not intended his comment to be audible to everyone, making a different remark 'as if repeating what he had said' (ibid.11). A little later his mockery of his sister is again apparent: "“Justine now shows tact”, murmured Aubrey' (ibid. 13). Readers find Aubrey still expressing his wry humour much later in the novel, this time, though still mocking his sister, also emphasising to the reader his aunt's bid for attention: "“I read Aunt Mattie like a book”, murmured Aubrey. “I wonder if it is suitable for Justine's little boy”" (ibid. 245). In his mocking murmurs Aubrey is highlighting Justine's tendency to 'manage' her little brother and his own awareness and discomfort in being the object of her well-meaning efforts; frequently, as here, his comments are useful also in revealing his perceptions of other characters and events.

It is noteworthy that many of Aubrey's murmurs offer commentary on members of his family, thus reinforcing for readers not only his own perceptive appreciation of their characteristics and his developing wit, but also confirming and extending their own insights into the family dynamic. Thus Aubrey, from his marginalised position in the family, provides, as do the Marcon twins, choric comment on the unfolding developments. The active participation of the readers is again solicited by the murmurs and mutters of those, like Aubrey, who on occasion fulfil what might be termed a 'bystanding' function: readers are invited to collude with the chorus, and thus with the narratorial voice, outside the power struggle, watching and listening from a distance with humour and compassion.

**f) Extended attributions** (*see Introduction, p. 7*)

One of the most significant features of Compton-Burnett's diction, and one which is instrumental in establishing point of view in her sparse, 'condensed' prose, is her use of what will be termed 'extended attributions'. This is where the reporting verb is modified, sometimes by a simple adverb or adverbial phrase, and often by something much longer and more complex but functioning adverbially. This aspect of Compton-Burnett's diction has already started to emerge in the discussion of *sotto voce* conversation, where the frequency and significance of periphrases such as 'said aside', 'said in a low voice', etc. have been noted.

Liddell attempted a specific analysis of how Compton-Burnett's characters speak – not all his examples are strictly speech attributions – under the heading 'Stage Directions', an appropriate heading in view of the closeness of the Compton-Burnett dialogue to dramatic dialogue. Liddell lists eighteen simple adverbs amongst 'about two hundred and fifty of the different ways in which the characters may speak', and admits that 'there may be nearly as many more' (Liddell 92). He notes that 'the author can thus give a very great precision to her effects of dialogue', pointing out one of Compton-Burnett's favourite locutions: characters may speak 'with/on a note...', 'with an air...', 'in a voice...', 'in a tone...', 'in/with a manner...' with a qualifying adjective in each case (90-92). Liddell does not continue the discussion, preferring to make the assertion quoted above.

These locutions, together with others, will be explored in some detail: the careless or hurried reader may not at first fully grasp the significance of such extensions; as s/he reads on, however, realisation may dawn that these intimations by the narrator serve many purposes, from the simple revelation of an action which

clarifies events, to profound insights into character, mood, motivation, and relationships. They also provide subtle examples of humorous irony which supports the narratorial stance.

Compton-Burnett's use of simple adverbs will not be examined here; Liddell's list of eighteen is considered adequate exemplification. It is noteworthy, however, that although the use of simple adverbs is by no means peculiar to Compton-Burnett, her deployment of them in addition to her frequent use of longer and more complex adverbial locutions is a salient feature of her diction.

**i) Short adverbial phrases: 'In/with a tone/manner/note/voice/air'**

Two chapters, Chapter 1 of *A House and its Head* and Chapter 3 of *A Family and a Fortune*, provide a variety of such locutions. In Chapter 1 of *A House and its Head* readers find six examples, for example: Ellen, who speaks 'employing a note of propitiation' (5); 'she said on a note of question' (ibid.); 'said Duncan, in a mechanical manner' (14). Chapter 3 of *A Family and a Fortune* yields sixteen such modifications: e.g. 'she said in a cool tone' (68); 'said Sarah, her tone leading up to further information' (69); 'said Blanche, turning to her son with a scolding note' (92). All are significant; a closer examination of Chapter 1 of *Men and Wives* will demonstrate the implications of such structures.

Of the eleven similar locutions in Chapter 1 of *Men and Wives*, four modify the verb reporting Harriet's utterances: 'said his mother in a soothed and gentle tone' (10); 'said his mother, in a different tone' (*Men and Wives*, 11); 'said Harriet in a deep, vibrant tone' (12); 'said Harriet in a passionate, crooning voice' (17). The first indicates how Harriet speaks to her favourite son, Gregory; the second refers to her tone when speaking to Matthew, who causes her great anxiety and with whom she

has the most difficult relationship; the third expresses her emotion as she addresses all four of her children, first enumerating her blessings but ending with her usual manipulative appeal: 'How I will try, if my weakness does not overtake me! I wonder if any of you can see me through it!' (12). As two of her children set off for their daily walk, they are adjured to come and say goodbye to their mother, her utterance reported by the fourth example above; she beckons 'with a large, maternal gesture' (17) for good measure. All four of these extensions contribute to the understanding of Harriet Haslam and her relationship with her children.

Another four of the eleven extensions offer similar insights into her husband; Godfrey speaks 'in a manner of making a last effort before yielding to fate' (9); 'in an easier tone than was warranted by his words' (12); 'in a rather empty voice' (14); 'in a coaxing, deprecating tone' (15). On the first occasion, he has been heartily but unsuccessfully trying to rally his wife's mood, as is usually the case; he is about to give up. On the second, he is addressing his favourite son, indicating that his scolding is not to be taken seriously. The third extension describes his tone when he seeks reassurance as to his wife's mental health from the doctor which the latter cannot provide, and which dismays Sir Godfrey, who does not know how to deal with his wife's illness. On the last occasion he is trying to persuade his reluctant eldest son to say a personal goodbye to his mother, whilst suggesting that he himself does not want to make too big an issue of it. Readers' appreciation of Godfrey's weakness is reinforced by these extensions: he does not know how to deal with his wife's emotions, and despite his love for his eldest son, does not seem able to influence him. He appears moreover not to be in complete control of his feelings: his tone is revealing on all four occasions. These extended attributions are strongly

implicatory of both the characters and relationships of Harriet and Sir Godfrey; the inferences drawn by readers will be confirmed as the novel unfolds.

**ii) Descriptive phrases or clauses used adverbially: suggestive of character, mood, motivation and relationships**

Such revealing attributions are particularly noticeable in Chapter 3 of *A Family and a Fortune*, where at least twenty-five examples can be found. For example

‘...said Blanche, who observed the formalities with guests with sincerity and goodwill’ (66)

Blanche’s ‘sincerity and goodwill’ have already been revealed to the reader; here s/he sees that they extend to guests and in particular even to the village gossip.

Another example is:

‘said Aubrey, reluctant to explain that he had been imagining future daughters for himself...’ (68)

The disabled Aubrey’s vulnerability is evidenced by many such extensions, which serve to enlist readers’ sympathy for this complex character and their understanding of the dynamics of the relationships between himself and his brothers, sister, and mother.

Like the examples quoted in section a) above, all such expansions of the verb provide information which enhances readers’ insights into the characters and their relationships and motivations.

### iii) Narrative extensions

On many occasions the modification of the verb in fact *narrates*: ‘...said Duncan, as he rose and left the room’ (*A House and its Head* 14).

‘....said Blanche, when her children had gone’ (*A Family and a Fortune* 93).

The reader is thus alerted to relatively insignificant actions which nonetheless clarify the sequence of events, and which by other novelists might have been straightforwardly narrated. In the first example, Grant has just said that he does not intend to go to church that morning, to which Duncan has responded that he expects Grant to do so; Duncan’s leaving the room indicates that as far as he is concerned the matter is closed, as indeed it is: Grant goes to church. Duncan’s leaving the room also allows interaction between the rest of the family. So early in the novel, both effects clarify and emphasise the relationship between Duncan and his dependents. The second example enables Blanche to speak to Edgar and Dudley without the presence of the children, and express her pride and satisfaction in her family, thus emphasising her happiness. Inserted as narrative extensions, the impact of the two sentences is minimal, simply informing readers of what is necessary for them to know.

On occasion a more significant action is narrated in this way: during an emotional discussion between Josephine Napier and her brother Jonathan in *More Women than Men*, an apparently trivial action by Josephine entails her eventual realisation of Gabriel’s parenthood and thus affects the course of her life and that of others: ‘said Josephine, picking up a paper and toying with it, her eyes down’ (*More*

*Women than Men* 188). The paper is a letter from Maria Rosetti, Gabriel's mother, revealing facts unsuspected by Josephine until this moment (see pp. 38, 9).

#### **iv) Humour, irony**

The utterances of those characters that are the principal sources of humour and irony are quite often mediated by humorous extended attributions. In *A House and its Head* these characters are Nance Edgeworth, the daughter of Duncan, the paterfamilias, Grant, her cousin and at the beginning of the novel Duncan's heir, and Almeric Bode, the son of the Edgeworths' neighbours; in *A Family and a Fortune* they are Dudley Gaveston, the younger brother of the Gaveston family, and his three nephews, Mark, Aubrey, and the rather malicious Clement. Felix Bacon (*More Women than Men*) and Julian Wake (*Brothers and Sisters*) are noteworthy for their wit, as is Charity Marcon (*Daughters and Sons*); in *Men and Wives* it is Sir Godfrey who is the unconscious cause of laughter. The extended attributions which report their dialogue, as well as the dialogue itself, are frequently playful and ironic.

A wry extension is the description of Ellen, Duncan's wife and the victim of his bullying, as a person 'to whom speech clearly ranked above silence' (*A House and its Head* 5). Ellen has already been bullied (at breakfast time on Christmas Day) by her husband, the patriarch, as the attributions of her previous utterances have shown. This time the narrative voice provides a touch of dry humour to relieve the tension under which Ellen constantly suffers. Again, in *A Family and a Fortune*, the dry narrative voice can be heard: Edgar asks his brother the age of his second son: 'wishing to know at this stage' (94). Edgar is rather distant in his relationship with his children; here he reveals that he does not know their ages, but feels he should. Sir Godfrey Haslam, the paterfamilias in *Men and Wives*, who comes from 'dissenting

stock', says prayers every day before breakfast: "'O Lord," he exclaimed, in tones of respect and admonition, that somehow indicated the words with capitals' (8); Sir Godfrey has already shown himself to be a comic character; by means of this extension, readers hear his melodramatic and thus ridiculous emphasis on his address to his Lord. In addition, minor characters are sometimes sources of satire or of ironic intervention. Sir Godfrey tells his butler he hopes that he, the butler, feels as well as he does himself. Buttermere's reply is, 'My circumstances have been at variance, Sir Godfrey', said while 'continuing the duties that had brought him to what he was' (5).

#### v) Other extensions

There are many extensions to the attributions which resist classification in the above groups. The first few pages of *A House and its Head* yield Duncan speaking 'with a little burst of bitter mirth' (6); Duncan again, speaking 'with a little laugh' (7); Ellen speaking 'with simple relief' (7); Duncan 'altering the weight on his words' (8); Ellen 'withdrawing her eyes from her husband' and 'stumbling over the words' (11); Ellen again, speaking 'with the open sigh which was her common sign of weariness' (12). The reader cannot fail, even from these quotations alone, to be unaware of Duncan's scornful and bullying attitude to his wife and of her inability to cope with it.

Perhaps one of the most eloquent illustrations of this type of extension (in Chapter 1 of *A House and its Head*) is to be found ten pages into the chapter: Sibyl speaks, 'addressing her mother for the first time that day' (15). This is the girl who has spoken to her father, 'caressing his shoulder' (8), and again 'with her head to one side' (9). She has just said, 'He [her father] and I have always been friends. I have known his look for me all my life' (15). The reader now strongly suspects what is

significant about Sibyl and her manipulative relationship with her father, so different from her lack of consideration for her mother; their suspicions will be borne out by her words and behaviour.

In every case these extensions are significant, offering an insight into some feature of character, attitude, or relationship.

**vi) ‘As if’; ‘seeming’**

These structures are used to good effect by Compton-Burnett: sometimes they may serve to introduce a phrase or clause dependent on the reporting verb, in which case they fall within the definition of ‘extended attribution’. Various inferences may be drawn as to the significance of these locutions.

‘That the overt significance of an action is not always its true one is frequently indicated by the use of “as if” or “as though”’ (Pittock 44). (Pittock does not attempt to quantify the adverb ‘frequently’.) In support of his contention Pittock analyses an extract from a novel which is not discussed in this thesis. However, if Pittock’s postulation is applied to Chapter 3 of *A Family and a Fortune*, its applicability can be tested.

a) “‘Isn’t the lodge rather small after their old home?’”

Sarah Middleton’s questions seemed to come in spite of herself, **as if** her curiosity were stronger than her will’ (*A Family and a Fortune* 66).

Sarah’s curiosity is indeed stronger than her will; it is her predominant characteristic, as is demonstrated on several occasions by narrative interventions. This is the readers’ first encounter with the Middletons, and the suggestion from the narrative voice is reinforced almost immediately: having

received a satisfactory answer, she speaks ‘with the full cordiality of relief from pain, which was the state produced in her by a satisfied urge to know’ (ibid.). Thus this is one of the occasions on which Pittock’s postulation does not hold true.

(b) ‘She looked about as she talked, **as if** she feared to miss enlightenment on any matter, a thing which tired her beyond her strength and which happily seldom occurred’ (ibid.). In case readers are not yet fully aware of Mrs. Middleton’s curiosity, the narrator adds a further intimation of its insatiability in the descriptive paragraph which follows the two quotations in (a): readers infer that she does indeed fear ‘to miss enlightenment’. Again, as in (a) above, the narrative voice plays its part in supporting the implication.

(c) Justine seems to suggest that she, Justine, may be guilty of being ‘too subtle’, at which ‘Aubrey gave a crow of laughter’. Blanche, his mother, says, ‘Aubrey darling!’, ‘**as if** to a little child’ (*A Family and a Fortune* 74). Blanche frequently treats Aubrey as younger than his fifteen years, as does Justine. This extension is a reminder of Aubrey’s apparently retarded development, which may be exacerbated by their treatment. However, it is not true that Aubrey is a little child. Moreover, the use of the word ‘crow’, indicating perhaps that the laughter was instantaneous and surprised, reveals Aubrey’s reaction to Justine’s application of the adjective ‘subtle’ to herself: such a perception by Aubrey would certainly demonstrate that he is far from being a ‘little child’. In this case, Pittock’s contention is valid.

(d) Following an exchange of barbed comments, during which Matty ‘had been waiting to interpose’ (ibid. 75), she tries to impart her good news. She is prevented from doing so by an unfortunate remark from her father, which

provokes a response from Blanche which in turn elicits an exasperated *sotto voce* comment from Justine. Matty does not ‘strain her ears to catch the words’, but tries again to give her news. Once again, she is frustrated. Eventually she succeeds in catching the attention of those present: “‘This is a very charming person, who has been a great deal with me’”, continued Matty, **as if** these interpositions did not signify’ (ibid. 76). Readers are already acquainted with Matty’s egocentricity and her frequently spiteful behaviour towards her sister’s family. The context of the quotation here makes clear Matty’s determination to take centre-stage: first she waits for an opportune moment, then she ignores Justine’s *sotto voce* remark, continuing what she has already started in a manner which suggests that the intervening utterances are not only unimportant to her but should be equally unworthy of consideration in general terms. However, Matty’s determination to wait for a suitable moment before imparting her news may be said to demonstrate that the interpositions have indeed signified.

(e) ‘Edgar’s eyes rested on his daughter **as if** uncertain of their own expression’ (ibid. 79). Justine, as Edgar’s only daughter, believes her relationship with him to be special. Readers already know, however, that Edgar does not reciprocate her love for him and struggles to maintain an appearance of affection. Here, as on other occasions, he wonders what feelings he may be revealing after one of Justine’s typically effusive outbursts. Readers are expected to recognise just that.

(f) “‘Mother dear, I have your permission to send for her?’” said Justine, **as if** the words of others could only be passed over’ (ibid. 81). After another slight altercation between Justine and Matty, Justine returns to the matter at hand,

which is whether Miss Griffin should be asked to join the family; she does so in a manner which seeks to indicate that ‘the words of others’ are a mere interruption and merit no further attention. Pittock is correct here: the fact that she is forced to adopt a specific manner demonstrates that she is not simply ‘passing over’ Matty’s words. The locution ‘as if’ in this case reinforces previous insights into the uneasy relationship between Justine and Matty.

(g) ‘said Justine, **as if** the words [of Thomas] had considerable import’ (ibid.89).

Thomas’s words are not in themselves significant (“He seems to strike his own note in his talk”). Clearly, Thomas’s words did not have ‘considerable import’; even Justine at her most effusive could not think otherwise. Again, Pittock’s suggestion is correct.

(h) ‘said Clement, slouching to Blanche, **as if** he hardly knew what he did’ (ibid.

93).The unsympathetic Clement holds himself aloof from his family. Here he has just been rebuked by his mother, which has displeased him, and has had to be reminded by his father of their usual custom of ‘parting for the night’.

He seeks by means of both his manner and his gait (‘slouching’) to give the impression that he pays little attention to either his father’s words or his parting from his mother. However, the implied negative (‘hardly’) is not valid: Clement certainly ‘knew what he did’. His ‘slouching’ gait is a reaction to his father’s rebuke, and indicates his resentful unwillingness to participate fully in family life. His attitude will become more marked as the novel progresses.

The above observations reveal that on occasion Pittock’s suggestion that Compton-Burnett’s use of ‘as if’ may indicate that the ‘overt significance of an action is not its true one’ does indeed hold good. It is also clear, in all of the examples above, that

these locutions are capable of complex interpretations as to character and relationships, and may provide insights into future developments. As is often the case with Compton-Burnett's style, readers are required to infer their own interpretation.

Furthermore, in this chapter there are also five uses of 'seem' (though none of 'appear'):

- (a) 'Sarah Middleton's questions **seemed** to come in spite of herself' (*A Family and a Fortune* 66);
- (b) 'said Aubrey, **seeming** to speak to himself' (ibid. 71);
- (c) 'Thomas gave a kindly smile which **seemed** to try to reach the point of amusement' (ibid. 77);
- (d) 'Maria Sloane was a person who **seemed** to have no faults within her own sphere' (ibid. 85);
- (e) 'This **seemed** a safe attitude' (referring to Aubrey) (ibid. 86).

The interpretation of this verb (in this chapter) is more straightforward:

- (a) This sentence precedes the introductory description of Sarah; it suggests the possibility of Sarah's curiosity, which is then reinforced;
- (b) This has already been discussed under the heading *Sotto voce*;
- (c) Is Thomas really trying to 'reach the point of amusement'? Or does he only appear to do so? Again, it suggests a possibility with regard to Thomas. In order to decide whether the suggestion is sound, readers need to know more about Thomas;

(d) This is the first impression Maria creates; readers need to know more about Maria before they discover that the suggestion is valid;

(e) The verb implies Aubrey's constant insecurity: it suggests the possibility that his embarrassment will be masked by his posture but that possibility is nullified as Clement notices his blushes. It is to Aubrey himself that his attitude seems safe, but only the reader (and Clement, Aubrey's chief tormentor) knows that Clement has seen him blush.

It is clear from the above discussions and examples that in the midst of this spare, condensed dialogue the distance of the narrative voice is undermined by extensions of the speech attributions such as those discussed above. The various interpretations of 'as if'/'as though' and the use of 'seem/appear' all have in common the insistence on the detachment of the narrative voice. In the latter case, the narrator does not *inform* readers of the most significant characteristics of her/his characters; rather, s/he *suggests* or *implies* a possibility which either has been indicated previously or will be reinforced later, leaving the reader to draw the appropriate inference. The interpretations of 'as if', though varied, nonetheless also emphasize Compton-Burnett's determination to appear to dispense with the omniscient narrator; in the above examples, she does not *assert* that Sarah's curiosity was stronger than her will, that Matty *wanted* to give the impression that the 'interpositions' did not matter, that Justine deliberately spoke in a dismissive tone, etc.: she merely *suggests*, or *implies*, the significance of the action. The very frequency of such locutions is evidence of the audibility of the narrative voice, and challenges the reader to monitor at this level.

## **Part Two: Ironies**

In Part Two I shall show how Compton-Burnett's techniques, explored in Part One, are used to specific purposes, satirical and ironical, targeting a number of subjects: the condition of the upper middle class at the end of the nineteenth century against a background of major national and international change, and the position of the Church of England with regard to the upper middle class. I shall also consider the issue of gender, with the ideals of the patriarch and the perfect wife as the starting point.

### **Chapter 1 Satire: The Church**

#### **a) Satire**

I shall establish a definition of satire before applying the concept to Compton-Burnett's work, starting with *Pastors and Masters*.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED Online, revised 2013) defines the noun 'satire' as

I. A literary composition, and related senses.

1.

a. A poem or (in later use) a novel, film, or other work of art which uses humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize prevailing immorality or foolishness, esp. as a form of social or political commentary. Freq. with *on, of, against*.

b. The genre of literature which consists of satires, satirical writing. Now also in extended use of other art forms.

For M.H. Abrams the reformatory element of satire is absent; he describes satire as

‘...the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation’ (Abrams 284-285).

He goes on to say that satire does not seek to evoke laughter as an end in itself but only at the expense of a butt, the subject to be ridiculed, outside the work. Clearly, the recognition of an author’s satiric aim (however satire is defined) pre-supposes the reader’s knowledge and understanding of the object of the satire; satire which focuses on the wickedness, foolishness, or inconsistencies of human behaviour is therefore more widely applicable than that which emphasises the socio-political or cultural dimension.

Lisa Colletta, writing in 2003 and specifically about Compton-Burnett, (and also Virginia Woolf, Evelyn Waugh, and Anthony Powell), states: ‘... in the dark humor of modernist satire the social content remains but its social purpose all but disappears’ (*Colletta, 2*). Later she develops this idea with reference to Compton-Burnett:

‘...she [Compton-Burnett] is not concerned to expose cruelty in order to correct it, and her satire has little that is salutary or corrective. She is concerned with how individuals cope with and respond to violent, threatening, and hostile circumstances, but offers no suggestion that those circumstances will be ameliorated’ (*Colletta, 62-63*).

Thus Colletta makes a clear distinction between intention to critique and intention to correct. This distinction will be borne in mind in a consideration of *Pastors and Masters*, the first of the novels studied here.

Colletta's labelling of Compton-Burnett's work as satiric is justified in the case of *Pastors and Masters*. There are three clergymen in the novel, Peter Fletcher, who comes closer to the ideal of a clergyman than any of the others under discussion; he is a kindly and humorous man but has homosexual tendencies *Explain fully*; he appears to be the chaplain of the school, as well as a parish priest, and is a friend of Mr. Herrick, the owner of the school. His nephew Francis assists his uncle; he is a sanctimonious prig who condescends to the female members of staff and his family. The third clergyman is the father of two of the pupils, and is an unremitting bully. He is no longer practising his calling, exemplifying a certain type of Victorian recruit to the church: 'He had been a parson and a younger son, and had come late into the family estate' (57). By this short narrative interpolation Compton-Burnett signals his background as a member of a landed family of fairly modest means, since the estate does not require the efforts of more than one of its sons and moreover is unable to support its younger son as well as the heir.

Hypocrisy and pious affectation, characteristics manifested by Francis Fletcher, are frequently the butt of satire, and familial cruelty, such as is the norm in the Bentley household, is a universal theme. When such vices are revealed in members of a profession who may be expected at least to aspire to higher standards of behaviour, the satire takes on greater force. None of the three clergymen is essential to the plot, however. Equally superfluous is Miss Lydia Fletcher, sister to one and aunt to another of the clergymen, an elderly spinster who undertakes a great deal of

parish work, but who is portrayed as ridiculous and deluded. Idiosyncratic in speech, eccentric in manner, and ridiculously convinced of her appeal to, and special ability with, her 'menfolk', it is they to whom she clearly channels her sexual energy. With the exception of her brother and possibly her nephew, those around her view her with derision; readers may reasonably infer that the author's intention in creating the character of Miss Lydia Fletcher is to denigrate the character and situation of the so-called 'spinsters of this parish'. Such a harsh depiction suggests contempt on the part of the author; however, such women are treated compassionately and with greater understanding on other occasions (see Ch. 4, v)).

In *Pastors and Masters*, the very lack of function of the three clergymen and Lydia emphasises their presence, and the plot itself is clumsy and contrived. Of the three clergymen, only Peter Fletcher can be considered as at all rounded. He is portrayed as a kindly and tolerant man, conscientious, with a wry and teasing sense of humour, though not without shortcomings, one of which (homosexuality) was against the law at that time. Francis Fletcher and Henry Bentley, however, are quite different cases: all the reader perceives of Francis is his mealy mouth, and all s/he sees of Henry is his cruelty. Whilst Peter's latent vice is only gently hinted at, the depiction of the failings of Francis and Henry is unrelieved by even the slightest hint of a positive attribute and is entirely lacking in charity or compassion. They may fairly be described as caricatures, which are often used with comic intent (and indeed Francis and Lydia provoke derisive laughter); on occasion the term may also be used in more serious circumstances, as in the depiction of Henry Bentley, whose callousness and cruelty are so extreme and unrelieved that many readers may find them difficult to believe. Nor is the novel lacking in other examples of mockery of religion in general and of the Church in particular: several of the other characters

exhibit attitudes or behaviour derisive of, or contrary to, mainstream Christian teachings. Yet Henry, Francis, and Lydia all present demeanours and attitudes which the reader not only knows exist but which s/he also knows can be the governing principle of their possessors' behaviour.

Despite the fact that the characters Herrick, Bumpus, and Masson are the agents of the plot, they are even less clearly delineated than the three clergymen. Since *Pastors and Masters* is very slight, the usual intervention of the narratorial voice, so cogently deployed in other Compton-Burnett novels, is necessarily not as pervasive; thus readers' insights and understanding are not enhanced by those means. Despite the involvement of the plot with academic life, the presence of three clergymen and of other characters derisive or dismissive of religion, together with one (Lydia Fletcher) who is the butt of mockery because of her practice of her beliefs, suggest that it is the Church which is the principal target of censure, with academia only secondary; nor does the ending suggest any hope of improvement. In view of the brevity of the novel, and of the contrived nature of the plot and the lack of characterisation, readers are free to infer that the sole aim of the novel is to criticise, and that therefore satire is its organising principle, thus qualifying it to belong to the genre of satire. However, the same conclusion cannot be justified with regard to the other novels under consideration: elements of satire are present in all Compton-Burnett's novels, but it is difficult to support an assertion that any novel other than *Pastors and Masters* belongs to the genre of satire. However, there are strong satirical elements in her work. Clergymen, who were more numerous and more influential than after World War I and subsequently, and were often themselves members of the landed class, provided a very visible target for her acid pen, particularly in these earlier novels.

**b) The Church** (*see Introduction, p. 10*)

It can be claimed with some justification that the Christian church, specifically the Anglican Church, was the socio-cultural dominant of the Victorian era in England. During the latter part of the nineteenth century the church as a whole experienced the need for greater recruitment as a result of a growing population and urban development; the evangelical movement of the early part of the century had also had an impact. As a result a number of new Anglican theological colleges were established (outside the universities of Oxford and Cambridge), and training for clergy was shortened; non-conformist churches, and their training facilities, also increased in number. Despite this, the Church of England was still perceived as more prestigious, certainly by the class amongst which Compton-Burnett's novels are set : '... party allegiance was closely related to religious denomination, with the non-conformists supporting Liberalism and the Church of England the Tories' (Harrison 24).

The dioceses of the Anglican Church varied not only in size but also in governance and style, depending on the incumbent bishop. Recruitment to the Anglican priesthood was also diverse: recruits might well be younger sons of large land-owning, even titled, families; often they were sons, grandsons, or nephews of clergymen, and their wives were daughters of clergymen.

However, not all livings were comfortable in financial terms. Some were in the gift of the local land owner, with at least an adequate stipend, and some younger sons benefited from their family's generosity, but lack of regulation resulted in considerable financial disparity between livings. Despite improved stipends towards the end of the century, clergymen were quite often in straitened financial

circumstances. It was by no means unusual for a rector to have to supplement his income by taking in lodgers or paying pupils, sometimes as boarders; this situation is illustrated in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. Nevertheless, the moral standing of the clergyman as head of the family of his parishioners, together with his social and political influence derived from his connections of family and friendship and his confidence and cultural superiority afforded by an Oxbridge education, could result in considerable status within the community. Since attendance at church on Sunday and at parish social activities was regarded as a duty amongst the landed gentry in that it set a good example for the 'lower orders' while at the same time providing an opportunity for distinguished families to re-affirm their status and renew their family ties, it might be said that the Church of England and the landed gentry formed a kind of unacknowledged alliance in the consolidation of the status quo: the Church of England 'could rely upon the support of [the aristocracy], the landed interest and the richer classes generally. In some villages the traditional structure of squire and parson remained unchanged at the end of the century' (Harrison 102). Thompson went further: 'Squire and parson shared kinship, responsibility, local leadership and often membership of the bench' (Thompson 5). The cosy situation of the 'parsons' described here is in marked contrast to that of the clergymen of the interwar years; the rural clergy of those years saw the squires decreasing in number, status, and influence, whilst urban clergymen toiled in slums.

Clergymen were perceived as representing God, the Divine Father at the head of his family, the congregation. The ideal Anglican clergyman, unlike his Roman Catholic counterpart, was to be married, thus providing an earthly family as role model for his parishioners. Being a clergyman's wife might almost be said to be a profession: the standards of virtue and conduct expected of her and her family were

as high as those demanded of the clergyman himself: they were required to demonstrate proper attitudes and behaviour in every sphere of life. Moreover, in order to facilitate the complete devotion of the father to his flock, his wife was required to shoulder a greater share of family responsibilities than a layman's wife. In addition, she – and her daughters – was expected to support the head of the household in his parish duties and to undertake her share of parish activities. Of particular benefit to a clergyman was a 'good' marriage, one in which the wife's family was well-to-do and of good social standing: she could enable her husband to extend his range of activities and enhance his status and therefore his influence among his more prestigious parishioners.

### **c) Compton-Burnett's continuing satire of the Church**

In five of the seven novels under discussion, *Brothers and Sisters* (1929), *Men and Wives* (1931), *A House and its Head* (1935), *Daughters and Sons* (1937), and *A Family and a Fortune* (1939), Compton-Burnett has depicted five families purportedly living according to the prevailing faith and principles of the day as embodied in the Anglican Church; Sir Godfrey Haslam (*Men and Wives*) and Sir Andrew Stace (*Brothers and Sisters*) are non-conformists, exceptions in Compton-Burnett's litany of squires; however, the clergymen in both novels are Anglican, as is Sir Andrew's daughter. Two of the novels, unusually for Compton-Burnett, are set in boarding schools rather than in a family home: *Pastors and Masters* (1925) and *More Women than Men* (1933). In neither of these novels do the pupils feature to any significant extent, the staff and their immediate circle 'standing in' for family. In all the novels except *A Family and a Fortune*, a clergyman is present, all of them Anglican, as is to be expected; in their depiction, Compton-Burnett provides an almost unrelentingly negative portrait-gallery of Anglican clergymen.

Several of Compton-Burnett's novels begin at breakfast-time, accompanied by grace or morning prayers, said by the paterfamilias, if present. In *Pastors and Masters* grace is said by Mr. Merry, who runs the school which is the setting for the novel, while his eyes 'were taking a covert survey' of his pupils (*Pastors and Masters* 7). Both before and after the prayer, he strives by means of a prolonged hectoring, and assisted by his wife, to induce in his pupils an attitude appropriate to the arrival of Mr. Herrick, the owner of the school, who is about to read morning prayers. Thus the prevailing ethos of the school is immediately established and at the same time undermined by Merry's harangue; the irony is compounded by his 'covert survey'.

*Daughters and Sons* is another novel which opens with prayers before breakfast. The apparent importance of prayers as a feature of family life is, however, undermined by the manner in which they are conducted by Sabine, indicated by the narrative voice which tells of: 'a vaguely wounding and threatening tone which revealed the general view of this office'; Sabine reads 'in a colourless, recitative tone, as though she gave no particular support to the ceremony.... Her feeling for him [the Almighty] was of such a nature that she only needed to have been born fifty years later than her date of eighteen hundred and ten, to fail to recognise him at all' (*Pastors and Masters* 7). Throughout this introduction to the Ponsonbys' family life the narrative voice emphasises the irony of the discrepancy between their supposed practice of their faith and the actuality. During the course of the novel there are brief discussions about the faith of Aunt Hetta; the children find it difficult to believe she has any. Here too, the rector, the interestingly-named Dr. Chaucer, is a significant character in both the family and the novel, and will be discussed below.

*Men and Wives* also opens with an introduction to the ‘dissenting’ paterfamilias, Sir Godfrey Haslam, who then conducts morning prayers in a style very much his own. The difference between the faith of Sir Godfrey and that of his wife is significant in this novel: Sir Godfrey enjoys performing ‘religious officiation’, whilst Harriet cares ‘only for the fundamentals of her faith’ (*Men and Wives* 8); she believes that her children should devote themselves to the service of others, while her husband’s attitude is more relaxed. The rector of the parish, Ernest Bellamy, an egocentric actor *manqué* is once again a family friend who expects, and receives, support for parish activities from the ‘big house’. The paragraph introducing him is, as usual in Compton-Burnett’s work, revealing of his character: ‘The rector of the Haslams’ village, the Reverend Ernest Bellamy, seemed what he was, a man who had chosen the Church because of its affinity to the stage in affording scope for dramatic gifts’ (43). His life is itself one long melodrama: at the beginning of the novel he is in the process of divorcing the flighty Camilla and at the end is about to marry Kate Dabis, one of the spinsters of the parish, who is seven years older than himself. In the interval he becomes engaged to Griselda, the daughter of Sir Godfrey and Harriet. Not long after, Griselda’s mother appears to have committed suicide; after her funeral, Griselda is understandably distraught. Bellamy arrives, wanting praise from his fiancée, seeming to perceive his conduct of the funeral as a solo performance by himself, and a successful one at that. He betrays not only his egotism but also his conceit in responding to Griselda’s question as to why her mother has killed herself: ‘Oh, come, come now, ... you must think of me, my Grisel. I cannot bear too much. You have not taken the strongest man for a husband: you must have a care for the man you have chosen. I have lived these last days in thought of you. I have thrown the whole of myself into my words of your mother, weighed every syllable I uttered, to give her only respect and compassion at

this time which is a trial of our own strength' (232). It is after this that Griselda's recognition of his complete egocentricity causes her to break off the engagement.

*Brothers and Sisters* does not open with either family prayers or the family at breakfast. However, one of the characters is called Christian, and it is clear that Sophia Stace, who as the matriarch says grace before every meal, and her family, are familiar with the protocols of the Anglican Church, including those attendant on a funeral. Once again the rector is a family friend, the Reverend Edward Dryden, a hypocritical coward (rather flatteringly named), who is regularly entertained by the Stace family. Compton- Burnett's introductory paragraph once again informs readers of what they need to know, describing him as having 'an oldworldness that allowed him the church as a provision for his sister and himself' (*Brothers and Sisters* 48). The implication of his relaxed attitude to his faith and the charm of his manner makes him an appropriate suitor for Dinah Stace to whom he becomes engaged; he is unable to maintain the relationship when the scandal of the Stace siblings' birth threatens to become public, and thus damage his reputation and his standing.

The family gathered round the breakfast table is the opening scene in *A Family and a Fortune* also, the only one of these seven novels which is without a clergyman; prayers are not said, nor is there reference to religious practice in the novel; however, Justine makes frequent reference to her work in the parish, and wants to keep some of her uncle's 'fortune' in order to be able to continue her work, and Dudley himself (the recipient of the 'fortune') talks of having visited the poor with his brother Edgar; he too intends to give a share of his fortune to the poor.

In *More Women than Men* the practice of religion does not feature. Readers might expect the head-teacher, Josephine Napier, to use the occasion of the return of her staff after the holidays to say prayers, but she does not. This lack can itself be perceived as ironic: the head of a school for the daughters of the landed gentry does not find it necessary to support one of the foundations on which the class rests. The clergyman in the novel, the Reverend Jonathan Swift, another clergyman in these seven novels who is graced with the name of a writer, is an open homosexual who has lived as such for twenty-two years; he does not attempt to practise, preferring to devote himself to his (unsuccessful) writing.

As in other novels, the importance of the practice of religion in *A House and its Head* is established very early. The Edgeworth family is gathered round the breakfast table on Christmas Day; Duncan, the paterfamilias, asks his children and his nephew the meaning of this, ‘the day of days’ (8). Thus it is already clear to readers that the Edgeworth family lives according to the pattern of the traditional Victorian family of a certain class, with the paterfamilias at its head, seeking to ‘guide’ his dependents along the path established by the church. Equally clear is the irony engendered by the contrast between Duncan’s dealings with his wife and family and his supposed faith. The importance of the church in the life of the village is demonstrated throughout the novel. Not only does the principal family, led by its head, attend church every Sunday, but the church and its vicar are, with the Edgeworths themselves, the focus of the social life of the village.

The church provides a venue for social interaction after service on Sunday, and also for meetings of the Dorcas Society, in which the Edgeworth women participate, along with the other ‘ladies’ of their class. These ladies, along with their menfolk, are seen to adhere to the rituals of the Anglican church; more important, perhaps, is

the fact that for some of the characters in the novel the church and its vicar are of considerable significance: for the spinsters Beatrice Fellowes, Rosamund Burtenshaw, and Dulcia Bode, the church, in the sense of both the building and the practice of religion, provides the axis around which their lives rotate. The Reverend Oscar Jekyll, an urbane sceptic, is found on one occasion playing cards with Duncan and the other gentlemen of their circle; this is one of the few occasions on which one of Compton-Burnett's male characters is seen participating in a leisure activity. It is made clear that although the Jekylls are descended from a good family, they have insufficient private income to supplement Oscar's stipend; they are obliged to take in boarding pupils, whom Oscar must teach and for whom his mother must act as matron. The irony of an unbelieving clergyman is patent; less so, perhaps, is the fact that he performs the duties expected of him at least as satisfactorily as some of the other clergymen in Compton-Burnett's canon. The narrative voice drily expresses his parishioners' opinion of their parson: '.... his views, though of some inconvenience to himself, were of none to his congregation as they were beyond the range of its suspicions' (*A House and its Head*, p.16). At the end of the novel Oscar marries Nance, the elder Edgeworth daughter, who is as sceptical, and as intelligent, as her husband-to-be; readers are however confident that the parish will be served by a kindly and humorous pastor and his eminently strong and sensible wife.

Duncan continues to demonstrate his lack of the Christian spirit by his callous cruelty to his wife and his harshly critical attitude towards other members of his family and their neighbours; nor do the rector or his curmudgeonly mother – or indeed most of the others members of the cast – compensate for Duncan's lack. Only Beatrice Fellowes, one of the priggish spinsters whose religiosity makes her a

laughing stock, reveals indications of sincere Christian belief and compassion, and even Beatrice is led into a session of spiteful gossip by Dulcia Bode.

In *A House and its Head* the hollowness of the Christian ethic according to which this reputedly model family operates is foregrounded as they set off for church on Christmas morning. As the ‘first family’ of the neighbourhood, the Edgeworths must set an example to their socially inferior friends and the villagers by their attendance at church. However, Duncan and Ellen are ‘unconscious that it was the only occasion in the week when they were seen abroad together’ (*A House and its Head* 16). Duncan has presided over a household in which Grant seizes every opportunity to womanize, one of the servants yields to bribery to murder an infant, his younger daughter is the one who bribes her to commit the murder, and his wife is harried to death by his bullying. Yet when his wife dies he does not remain grief-stricken for long but rather convinces himself of his excellence as a husband, and soon marries a second wife much younger and more beautiful than the first; she soon absconds with the only eligible man in the neighbourhood, in the process robbing Sibyl Edgeworth of a potential husband; Duncan then marries for a third time. The mood engendered by the almost unrelieved and bitter irony of the contrast between Duncan’s impenetrable self-satisfaction and readers’ perceptions of him is lightened only by the depictions of Grant (flawed but flippantly witty), of Cassie Jekyll (the former governess of Nance and Sibyl Edgeworth and companion to their mother) and Nance Edgeworth, two strong and intelligent women, and of Oscar Jekyll, the agnostic clergyman.

Perhaps the most egregious example of the Anglican clergy is the Reverend Dr. Chaucer in *Daughters and Sons*. He is referred to by the Ponsonbys, the leading family of the neighbourhood, as ‘a family friend’, though his sycophancy and

ambition suggest that he is not quite of the same social standing. He is a more developed version of Francis Fletcher (*Pastors and Masters*), similarly obsequious in his speech and manner. Chaucer, like Francis, seeks to ingratiate himself with the members of his circle, but in his case more specifically with the Ponsonbys. The impression conveyed in the paragraph which introduces him (see the section Introductory Paragraphs) is as ironically inappropriate as that produced of Oscar Jekyll: Chaucer's appearance is ridiculous, his manner unctuous, conceited and self-important; his confidence and poise, however, reveal his lack of awareness of this ridiculousness and thus his self-importance and vanity; readers' impression of vanity is supported by his exaggerated care for his person. The implied superficiality of his doctorate strongly suggests a lack of intellectual depth. Perhaps in his favour, however, is his respectful attitude to women, even eleven-year-old girls.

Sycophancy is Chaucer's prime characteristic. He is a frequent visitor to the Ponsonby house, where he always takes care to show great interest in its doings, seeking to involve himself in them. The evening of the play in the village hall—chosen by Chaucer and written by a member of the Ponsonby family—is a difficult occasion for Chaucer, who tries not to omit any of the family members from his attentions. After 'welcoming Sabine, with his eyes held from other distractions, until he had honoured womanhood in age' (*Daughters and Sons* 94), he advises the boys where to sit, 'modifying his tone for masculine youth' (*Daughters and Sons* 95). Nor does he forget the younger generation: even eleven-year-old Muriel is not exempt from his attentions: when she is asked to pass the cups, Chaucer immediately demurs: 'Stay, Mrs. Ponsonby ... neither I nor your grandsons can submit to such ministrations from a lady, however young' (70). On a later occasion, in response to a

remark of Muriel's, he shakes 'in disproportionate mirth' (199) in an attempt to demonstrate his ability to be at ease with children.

Similarly, he seeks to ingratiate himself with the older 'children'.

Discussing the possibility of staging Frances's play,

'Chaucer was drawn into the younger group, and appeared to relish the position. He sat with his hands on his knees, leaning forward into the midst, wearing an elated, conspiratorial air and glancing at the elders of the family with simple furtiveness. When the conference ended, he rose to his feet and, after bare, smooth farewells, went with a suggestion of tiptoeing to the door, seeming to feel that this interest excluded any other' (71).

Readers are given an insight into the 'younger group's' (the 'children' of the above paragraph) opinion of Chaucer after this first appearance: 'Chaucer really thinks he is a chivalrous man,' says Chilton, sardonically (73).

Chaucer's unctuous flattery, however, is most in evidence in his dealings with women. Even the unusually tall, ungainly confirmed spinster, Miss Charity Marcon, receives a flattering remark from Chaucer. With reference to her writing, she has described herself as 'accurate and industrious and other low things' (104-105); Chaucer hastens to rebut her self-deprecation: '.... we can't all do our work on your level .... is a good thing there are lighter matters for lighter efforts; we will not say lower' (105). (Charity's brother recognises the insincerity: 'He thinks they are lower' (105).)

Meeting Edith Hallam, the governess whom he sees as a possible wife, for the first time, Chaucer immediately adopts his usual fulsome approach to women. He soon embarks on a mealy-mouthed eulogy of womanhood, attempting to add empathy to flattery in his approach to the woman he regards as a potential wife. He uses one of his characteristic ploys to embark on the preamble to his proposal,

‘drawing up a chair to Edith’s, so that they sat apart from the rest’ (159). (He often ‘draws up a chair’ or ‘leans forward’.) Hearing that she thinks she has more liberty than the rest of the household, Chaucer seeks to convince her that he understands and empathises with the position of women such as herself: ‘I had almost said, “What liberty?” Liberty of a kind, yes. Kindness in a measure. But what is such kindness, liberty – courtesy – to anyone strung up to every tone, as you must be?’ (159). Despite Edith’s dismissive rejoinders, he persists in his attempt to beguile her, speaking ‘almost tenderly, with his eyes on her face’ ... ‘How different a thing is a woman’s courage from a man’s! How could a man dare the woman’s lot, the little pinpricks and pettinesses, the grinding, pitiless monotony?’ (159). This utterance is in ironic contrast to his later remarks to Edith’s successor. However, earlier in the novel, on the occasion of the village play, readers have encountered his true opinion of women; hearing that something has gone wrong with the women’s dresses, his condescending amusement is revealed: ‘The women! ... That is a hitch indeed, when the ‘women’ depend on their dresses for their very nature’ (96).

Chaucer’s attitude to the matriarch Sabine is complex. Just before the start of the village show, the narrative voice slyly tells the reader, ‘They reached the village hall to find Chaucer welcoming Sabine’. However, readers must question the basis of this apparent respect for Sabine when, during the conversation after the revelation that the play has been written by France, Chaucer goads Alfred mercilessly for dropping and breaking a teapot. It has become clear that Sabine has developed a close bond with Alfred, her grandsons’ tutor, and Chaucer’s three-and-a-half page attack on him casts doubt on his respect for Sabine’s evaluation of human nature: the possibility of jealousy on his (Chaucer’s) part is strongly suggested. Nonetheless, the kind of flattery he utters to Rowland Seymour (‘I always feel that the old patriarchal system is nobly exemplified in it [the Ponsonby family] .... Or shall we say

matriarchal?’ (146)) is interspersed with what seems to be solicitude: he says to Chilton, ‘... You will allow me my word? You will remember your grandmother is a very old lady, and, as such, as entitled to your chivalry as she is dependent upon it. We show honour to the weaker vessel’ (158). A little later, when Victor is embarrassed because Sabine has made it clear to the company that she would like them to leave, Chaucer moves forward to smooth over the awkward situation: ‘... there is no need for you to feel embarrassed over the little contretemps. I can assure you that we view it with complete understanding, and with a respect for our hostess that is undiminished’ (167). Readers may conclude that Chaucer is not devoid of genuine emotion or good qualities: his consideration for the aged Sabine may well be genuine, his feeling towards Alfred the result of jealousy.

This interpretation is supported by his dealings with Hetta. Here too Chaucer’s emotions are more complex than a conceited belief that he is a good match for any woman. His latent passion for her is revealed early in the novel: he laughs admiringly at her instructions to the boys (70), and a little later Muriel asks, ‘Chaucer keeps staring at Aunt Hetta, doesn’t he?’ (73). Even while he is engaged in making his approach to Edith Hallam, he expresses admiration for Hetta: ‘Even to you ... that problem must be insoluble.... Though I venture to think that something of your spirit detached itself and held your place’ (146). When Hetta remarks that she is ‘receiving applause’, he offers a more personal compliment: ‘You are indeed receiving it’, said Chaucer in a lower tone. ‘You indeed are your brother’s truest success’ (164).

On discovering that John and Edith are to be married, he seeks to ally himself with Hetta by speaking to her ‘in a low tone’ (*Daughters and Sons*, p.197), thus suggesting intimacy and sympathy: ‘... But what sort of requital is this, for the

years you have given your brother?’ (197-198). In the face of Hetta’s dismissal of the suggestion of great change in the family, Chaucer persists in his expression of sympathy, to the extent of using Hetta’s Christian name for the first time: ‘But, Miss Hetta, when he comes back, there will be the great adjustment’ (198).

Even in conversation with the child Muriel, he voices his concern for Hetta: ‘That will put even more upon your aunt’ (199). It is not surprising that Muriel again comments on his attention to Hetta: ‘Dr. Chaucer is staring more than ever at Aunt Hetta, isn’t he?’ (200), and that Chilton suggests ‘a dog-like devotion’ (200) as an appropriate label for Chaucer’s feelings for Hetta.

He continues to demonstrate his regard for Hetta when she returns after her sham suicide. When John rebukes her for her overbearing supervision of the servants, Chaucer speaks tactfully in her defence: ‘I think we few of us realise.... how much our lives depend upon the constant and unseen efforts of those who ask no recognition. If we did realise it, I think we should hardly dare to live and breathe and have our being’ (274). A few minutes later, what the narrator describes as ‘a shrill laugh’ from Hetta, and John refers to as ‘laughing me to scorn’, is translated by Chaucer as ‘a peal of mirth which trilled across the room’ (275).

It is on this same occasion that Chaucer’s hopes are raised, and his courage with them. Hetta delivers a lengthy and uncontrolled tirade, after which she is so emotionally over-wrought and exhausted that she staggers. Chaucer, seeing this, ‘rose and came towards her, holding out his arms, his face in a glow of pity, admiration, and rising hope.... and he put his arms about her, and, stooping over her, led her aside’ (281). At this point readers perhaps feel a greater sympathy for

Chaucer than has previously been the case: what might have been interpreted as ambition is now confirmed to be sincere regard – though perhaps with an admixture of hope of advancement - and it can be inferred that approaches to other possible marriage partners have been undertaken because of his belief that Hetta was beyond his reach whereas lesser mortals were bound to be grateful for his proposal.

Self-serving and obsequious manipulation, however, is not Chaucer's only conspicuous characteristic. Readers learn when they first meet him that he is aware of – and perhaps rather self-conscious about – his academic qualifications; their perception is confirmed after the play, when 'Chaucer withdrew to assume his doctor's gown for the presentation of some prizes', and returned 'with a conscious flush' (*Daughter and Sons*, p.103). A few minutes later on the same occasion his self-consciousness is again apparent; responding to what he assumes is a complimentary remark from Chilton, he speaks 'with a gratified flush' (109).

However, such sensitivity is outweighed by his conceit and self-regard, at their most evident when he proposes to Edith Hallam. Despite her rebuff, he persists: 'You can have no inkling. It would transcend your furthest dreams. And if you could guess it, your tongue would be barred. ... I will go slowly. You shall have time' (160). This over-weening condescension elicits a stronger and more overt rebuff from Edith, yet Chaucer does not quite believe it: 'Did you want me to say it in words?' His conceit prevents him from believing that he, who dares to harbour feelings for Hester Ponsonby, is being rejected by a mere governess. After some further words from Edith, clarifying her position, Chaucer is still incredulous: 'Am I to understand you do not wish for what I offer?' (160).

It cannot be denied that Chaucer is an unsympathetic character.

Nevertheless, unlike Henry Bentley and Francis Fletcher (*Pastors and Masters*), he is not unremittingly unpleasant, nor, despite his assiduous cultivation of the Ponsonby family, does he entirely neglect his parish work. Readers might well infer that his consideration for Sabine is genuine, and that his feelings for Hetta are sincere. To his credit, once he has grasped that Edith is refusing his proposal, he extricates himself from the awkward situation ‘with grave gallantry’ (161), and even Miss Blake (the third governess to whom he proposes) acknowledges that when she rejected him, ‘He did fairly well’ (233). His articulacy is amply demonstrated throughout the novel, and on occasion undoubtedly smoothes over tense moments (105, 167, 274, 275). However, it emerges clearly from Chaucer’s behaviour throughout the novel that he is far from embodying the values required of a Christian clergyman. A clue to his attitude to his faith is provided by Clare fairly early in the narrative; describing his sermon, she says, ‘.... it was stilted and lifeless. I think it came out of a book’ (59).

The discrepancy presented by Compton-Burnett to her readers between the supposedly Christian environment of family life and the actuality is glaring. The observance of faith manifested in prayer, church attendance, and friendship with the clergy is seriously at odds with the families’ words and actions and with the family dynamic. They are attended by clergymen who range from an out-and-out ‘sinner’ who does not in any case practise (Jonathan Swift in *More Women than Men*), through a non-believer (Oscar Jekyll in *A House and its Head*), a mealy-mouthed sycophant (Dr. Chaucer in *Daughters and Sons*), an urbane but cowardly hypocrite (Edward Dryden in *Brothers and Sisters*), an actor *manqué* (Ernest Bellamy in *Men and Wives*), a callous bully (Henry Bentley in *Pastors and Masters*), a sanctimonious

prig (Francis Fletcher), to an amiable ‘pastor’ who is a latent homosexual (Peter Fletcher, both *Pastors and Masters* again). Whether any of these men is worthy of his calling is questionable, and their collective depiction, together with the hypocritical stance of the leading families of their parishes, must constitute a forceful satiric attack on the Anglican church. The irony of the instability of the moral foundation upon which this stratum of society is built speaks to the degradation of the landed class itself.

The satire applied to the Church across the works studied in this thesis certainly suggests that satire is an element in Compton-Burnett’s writing, perhaps even the predominant element in *Pastors and Masters*, but I will go on to argue that her work goes beyond the aims of satire and produces a less polemical and more ironical approach.

## Chapter 2 Irony: Class and Family

### a) Irony

In this chapter, various concepts of irony will be considered before deciding upon Situational Irony as appropriate for application to Compton-Burnett's depiction of class and family. Compton-Burnett uses this trope frequently in her mature novels; I intend to illustrate this with examples drawn from subject-matter relating to specific examples. Instances of dramatic irony and tragic irony will be identified where they occur.

Compton-Burnett's friend and fellow novelist the late Francis King was quite unequivocal in his opinion with regard to the question of 'satire or irony' in her work; in answer to my questions, he wrote:

I certainly do not regard Ivy C-B as a satirist .... She is not satirising the upper-middle classes of her chosen period, but using their lives, in their claustrophobic isolation as in a test-tube, to demonstrate the basic complexities of all human behaviour. But her sly and subtle wit often depends on irony, which is certainly intentional...

I do not think that her view of life is at all a *despairing* one. .... Her view of human existence is certainly one totally without illusions, morally stern and stoical in its endurance of the tragedies that befell her ... (e-mail to the author, 05/02/08).

Less frequently in her early novels but with increasing frequency in later work, lawyers rather than clergymen are targeted by Compton-Burnett; teachers of

all kinds receive sharp-tongued but sometimes sensitive attention, and writers receive ironically jocular treatment; unmarried women may be mocked, though not always unkindly, and those married women on whom Christianity makes impossible demands are examined with great compassion.

A.E. Dyson tells his readers, ‘My main contention [in defining irony] is that no embracing theories or criteria are possible’ (Dyson ix); thus we are alerted to the instability of definitions of irony. Dyson is supported by Wayne Booth, who writes, ‘For reasons that I cannot pretend fully to understand, irony has come to stand for so many things that we are in danger of losing it as a useful term altogether’ (2). In Footnote 2 on the same page he speaks of ‘defining a term that will not stay defined’. Booth does not exaggerate; for the purposes of this thesis, however, it is necessary to establish working definitions of the strands of irony applicable to Compton-Burnett’s novels. Using the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a starting point, the primary definition of irony can be stated as ‘The expression of one’s meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect; *esp.* (in earlier use) the use of approbatory language to imply condemnation or contempt ... In later use also more generally: a manner, style, or attitude suggestive of the use of this kind of expression’ (OED Online, revised 2013). This is what is now referred to as Verbal Irony, and was the only form of irony recognised as such until the turn of the eighteenth century, when theories of irony started to be formulated. The *Oxford English Dictionary* is again useful in supplying a second definition of the term, which indicates the broadening of the concept: ‘A state of affairs or an event that seems deliberately contrary to what was or might be expected; an outcome cruelly, humorously, or strangely at odds with assumptions or expectations’ (OED Online, revised 2013). This description has proved to be only

the point of departure for a proliferation of definitions (and labels) covering a multitude of strands of irony, applied in diverse fields. Abrams' entry on irony is helpful:

'... it seems to be of the essential nature of irony (the need to use the word 'seems' instead of 'it is' is a product of the ambiguousness of the whole concept) that it eludes definition; and this elusiveness is one of the main reasons why it is a source of so much fascinated inquiry and speculation. No definition will serve to cover every aspect of its nature ... it seems fairly clear that most forms of irony involved (sic) the perception or awareness of a discrepancy or incongruity between words and their meaning, or between actions and their results, or between appearance and reality...' (Abrams 429-430).

He goes on to assert that there are two 'basic' kinds of irony, verbal irony and the irony of situation. In a list of practitioners of Situational Irony, Abrams includes Ivy Compton-Burnett, and it is this category which will be explored. The discussion will be informed by the profound and wide-ranging perceptions into irony of D.C. Muecke and Wayne Booth, the more recent ones of Claire Colebrook, and by the more practical insights of Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short and Joan Lucariello and Cameron Shelley from the fields of stylistic linguistics and the cognitive sciences respectively.

Leech and Short, writing specifically in terms of discourse in fiction, suggest a concise and cogent definition of irony: 'For fictional purposes, irony can be defined as a double significance which arises from the contrast in values associated with two different points of view. ... The most usual kind is that which involves a contrast

between a point of view stated or implied in some part of the fiction, and the assumed point of view of the author, and hence of the reader' (Leech and Short 223; see Wales, 2014). Thus they signal the important question of narrative tone and the narrator's voice; this issue is fully explored in relation to Compton-Burnett.

Colebrook states:

'It is as though there is the course of human events and intentions, involving our awarding of rankings and expectations, that exists alongside another order of fate beyond our predictions. There is an irony of situation, or an irony of existence; it is as though human life and its understanding of the world is undercut by some other meaning or design beyond our powers ...'. (Colebrook 14).

She goes on to assert that dramatic, cosmic, and tragic irony are related to verbal irony 'in that both share a notion of meaning or intent beyond what we manifestly say or intend. In dramatic and cosmic irony this other meaning is plot or destiny' (ibid. 15). In her use of vocabulary such as cosmic, fate, and destiny Colebrook reveals the ambiguity and intangibility indicated by Booth and Abrams.

D.C. Muecke quotes both O.E.D. definitions (from an earlier edition) before embarking on his exploration of his subject, and claims that the most familiar types of irony to English-speakers are Verbal and Situational, one of his 'observable ironies'. He stresses what both have in common, 'the juxtaposition of incompatibles' (Muecke 42), and clarifies the distinction between the two: situational irony does not imply an ironist but merely a 'condition of affairs' or 'outcome of events' (Muecke 42) which is seen or felt to be ironic. He points out, however, that in plays and novels the position is not a simple one: 'Now we have an ironist being ironical by

showing us something ironic happening'. The following sentence starts to clarify Muecke's position: 'Strangely enough, when there is no ironist but simply something ironic happening, we often speak and feel as if Life or Fate or Chance were an ironist being ironical' (Muecke 42). Later, he is more explicit, asserting that terms such as irony of Fate, Life, Chance, or Things seem metaphysically loaded, and therefore ought to be employed only by those who hold the particular beliefs implied by them. Thus forewarned, Muecke's readers do not expect discussion of ironies in such terms. However, Muecke makes a usefully lucid point which is significant in any interpretation of Compton-Burnett's work: 'Talking about Situational Irony means talking about the kinds of situations we see as ironic and also, therefore, about the observer's sense of irony, his attitudes, and responses' (ibid. 43). Muecke lists this question of the reader's sense of irony as his fourth 'necessary condition' for situational irony: 'an observer with a sense of irony' (ibid. 101). The first three are duality, opposition of terms, and the element of alazony ('the victim's confident imperceptions or ignorance of there being anything in the situation beyond what he sees' (ibid. 100)).

For a more specific, less 'metaphysically loaded', and therefore more practically applicable, definition of Situational Irony, the cognitive sciences can be of service. The sub-title of the chapter headed 'Situational Irony' in *Irony in Language and Thought* (Gibbs and Colston 467) is 'A Concept of Events Gone Awry', a neat encapsulation of Joan Lucariello's full definition. She believes the second *Oxford English Dictionary* definition to be incomplete, but acknowledges that it 'does capture a couple of key features of narrative events. One is unexpectedness. The second is human fragility, carried in the idea that ironic events 'mock' the normal order of things' (Gibbs and Colston 467.) She elaborates the definition: 'Situational

irony, then, flags those situations that should not be. It is a theory of the irregularities in human activity. Said differently, it may be thought a theory of the world's undependability, capturing our understanding that we cannot rely on ourselves, on others, or on events to run a standard course' (ibid. 468.) She goes on to point out the similarity between verbal and situational ironies: '... [they] could be said to be alike in exhibiting a duality, characterised by an opposition of terms. Both entail a 'juxtaposition of incompatibles' - what is said (literal meaning) versus what is intended (nonliteral meaning) in the verbal case and what occurred versus what was expected to occur in the situational case. An added similarity between the two forms of irony is that verbal irony, like situational, entails unexpectedness' (Ibid.468).

Lucariello draws heavily from Muecke in pointing out that in situational irony there is no ironist, but rather an observer whose responses and attitudes are important: 'Verbal irony implies an ironist, a speaker who deliberately uses a technique.... Situational irony does not imply an ironist but an observer of a condition of affairs that is seen as ironic' (Gibbs and Colston, 468).

Clearly, in the case of irony in literature, the ironic situation is presented to the reader by the writer; Lucariello's colleague Cameron Shelley develops Lucariello's theory, again using Muecke as his main source, by discussing the emotions related to situational irony. He asserts that some kinds of situational irony may be associated only with particular emotions, and further that any heightened emotional response increases the salience of a situation and hence might intensify the ironic response. He quotes Muecke: 'Other things being equal, ironies will be more or less forceful in proportion to the amount of emotional capital the reader or observer has invested in the victim or topic of the irony' (Gibbs and Colston 541).

Expanding on the aspect of emotional response, Shelley writes, ‘Ironies frequently proceed from surprise to sadness.... Complex emotions such as pity and despair typically result: pity for those persons caught in a sad situation, and despair that situations such as the one in question may often turn out contrary to expectation’ (ibid. 567). Other progressions he posits are from surprise to anger, from surprise to disgust, and much less frequently, from surprise to happiness or satisfaction in the event of the serving of poetic justice. Readers of Compton-Burnett immediately recognise these progressions – or lack of them.

**b) Class** (*see Introduction, p.10 for b), c), d)*

Compton-Burnett’s novels concern themselves in the main with the late Victorian or Edwardian upper middle-class, or landed, family; hence these discussions will focus solely on this class during this era. Before embarking on discussion some historical context is necessary.

The confidence and optimism of the early- and mid-Victorian eras, generated by Great Britain’s lead in the industrial revolution and by her political as well as economic supremacy consequent upon the incipient empire, saw the landed classes of Great Britain enjoying a life of status, privilege, power and influence; Thompson sums up the situation on which this state of affairs was founded: ‘...the rule of the landed interest was based on deference, on the whole voluntarily accorded, and not on outright power and coercion’ (272). (An alternative interpretation of this state of affairs suggests itself here: the apparent ‘deference’ was the result of the dependence of the lower classes on the landed classes.) However, the position of the ‘squirearchy’ was seriously eroded by the time of Compton-Burnett’s birth in 1884, the year which roughly coincides with the earliest setting of her novels. (In most

cases the action takes place between 1885 and the early 1900s). The mood of the country was very different, and wholesale societal changes were underway.

Disastrous harvests during the late 1870s, combining with the scale of the imports of grain from North America, resulted in a gravely weakened agricultural sector, which had been dominated by the landowners, the aristocracy and the landed gentry: in 1851, one fifth of the gross national income came from agriculture, by 1891, only one thirteenth (Harrison 21). Rent arrears and bankruptcy among tenant farmers and abandoned farmland all contributed to the decreasing value of land; further encroachments on land took place because of the expansion of industry and the growth of the working classes. During the last quarter of the century it became necessary for members of the aristocracy and also for some of the landed gentry to sell off portions of their estates (Thompson, p. 319).

Hence the importance of the management of their estates for the benefit of future generations weighed ever more heavily on landowners and their elder sons, whose income from rents was steadily diminishing. The growth of the trade and manufacturing classes, who now had entry to professions such as the Anglican clergy, the judiciary, the civil, diplomatic, and colonial services, and the officer class of the armed forces, further undermined the pre-eminence of the landed gentry, whose domain they had previously been. In other areas too traditional social structures were changing: increased scientific knowledge was bringing about the questioning of religious certainties, whilst increasing non-conformism was starting to compete for membership with the established church. However, though the landed classes may have been deprived of some of their power, their influence remained considerable: it was still the case that even into the 1880s most entrants into the

professions mentioned above were younger sons of the landed classes and that the local justice system was dominated by the same group.

Traditional family-life amongst the landed gentry was modelled ‘upon the same basic premises [as those of the aristocracy] of an assured income and leisure’; the squire was ‘the backbone of county society’; such men were, in effect, ‘the day-to-day rulers of the shires’ (Harrison 38-9). Harrison develops his proposition:

It was they who enforced the game laws, their wives and daughters who visited the village sick and aged, and their families who filled the assembly rooms of the county town at that annual highlight, the Hunt Ball. Hunting was the gentlemanly activity par excellence. (39)

The ‘squirearchy’ fought to retain their privileged way of life, some of its members moving with the times, selling off land for development and investing in manufacturing and the developing railways. However, they remained convinced of the rightness of their position and privileges, and of their responsibilities as an integral and essential part of the structure of society. Not only did they therefore seek to safeguard their way of life, but *faute de mieux*, they strove to ‘keep up the appearance’ of it in the eyes of their social circle and of the ‘lower orders’. Moreover, since the prestige attached to their position in society still held sway and successful manufacturers and tradesmen were anxious to buy into the gentry, they had ‘one inestimable advantage: their rivals aspired not to overthrow but to join them’ (Harrison 30). However, in 1880 Disraeli identified as one of the ‘two subjects which most occupy the thoughts of the country at the present moment [are] the principles upon which the landed property of this country should continue to be established’ (Perkin 133.) Disraeli perceived that for the next few years political activity would ‘mainly consist in an assault upon the constitutional position of the

landed interest' (Perkin 133). Following improvements in the conditions of the Irish peasantry (the Irish Question was Disraeli's other 'subject'), English, Scottish, and Welsh farmers gained similar rights. Shortly afterwards, moderate land reformers hardened their position, demanding free trade in land and becoming more extreme in their opposition to privately owned land. Furthermore, legislation passed during the last two decades of the 19th century and the first of the 20th makes it clear that the middle classes with active wealth and those who practised professions took issue with those landlords whose wealth was idle and unearned:

In the long run the old aristocrat influence could not resist the force of the intellectuals, for charm and cultivated manners were no match for reason, investigation and administrative vigour. The representatives of the old order were either too indolent to produce a coherent reasoned defence of their position or too well aware of the impossibility of justifying privilege. (Thompson 300)

Thompson goes on to assert that by the outbreak of the Great War this legislation was resulting in 'nothing less than the dissolution of the great estate system and the formation of a new race of yeoman' (333).

### **c) Middle class ideology of family**

Despite socio-historical changes, the principal element in the maintenance of social stability was still considered to be the family, perceived as an admirable, and indeed the essential, social unit; the nuclear family was considered to consist of a married heterosexual couple and their children, with the possible addition of dependants. The centrality of the family's role in society and of its hierarchical structure was reinforced by religion, specifically Christianity usually in the form of the Anglican

Church: a united family, led by a benevolent patriarch representing God and supported by his helpmeet, was held to be the ideal model. The paterfamilias cared and provided for his family and was enabled by his supposedly greater capacity (than his wife) for reason and logic not only to resist the danger and corruption of the world outside the home but also to fulfil his wider obligations to queen (or king) and country, assisted by his devoted wife. Their home was considered to be a 'haven isolated from the trials and temptations of the 'real' world outside' (Calder 13); indeed, for men, the definition of 'goodness' necessitated 'a home, a wife, children, and servants. It needed a door to shut against temptation, corruption, and threat' (ibid. 15).

The ideology of many of these families was deeply conservative; the bedrock upon which their lives were built was their commitment to the status quo of ideology, gender-role and class. Attendance by the family in the 'big house' at church on Sunday and at parish social activities was regarded as a duty, in that it supported the status quo, set a good example for the 'lower orders', and at the same time provided an opportunity for distinguished families to affirm their status. In a society in which the proper business of the eldest son of the landed gentry was perceived as following his father into the management of his property, and in which therefore the taking up of a profession was necessitated only if income from estate and investments was inadequate, the situation of the younger son could be less than secure. In some cases such sons might have an income of their own; in prosperous estates both income and the work entailed in management were sufficient to support – indeed, to require – the participation of more than one male member of the family. In less prosperous cases, younger sons were forced to take up a profession, few of which were considered

desirable (the civil, foreign, and colonial services, the law, the Church, medicine, writing, and the military; school teaching and tutoring only barely so).

**d) Compton-Burnett's ironic treatment of class and family**

It is noteworthy that the families in Compton-Burnett's novels do not entertain, and are not entertained by, other landed families who might be presumed to live in the area. Thus the isolation of such families is emphasised, and their already decreased number is strongly implied. The extreme narrowness of their social circle contributes to the difficulty of marriage and hence procreation: the presence of surplus women is foregrounded in many of Compton-Burnett's novels.

Before addressing the novels themselves it is salutary to remember Lucariello's proposition concerning the distinction between verbal and situational ironies:

Verbal irony implies an ironist, a speaker who deliberately uses a technique... Situational irony does not imply an ironist but an observer of a condition of affairs that is seen as ironic. (Cited in Gibbs and Colston, 468)

In the case of literature, the reader is the observer.

Four of the seven novels studied here, *Brothers and Sisters*, *A House and its Head*, *Daughters and Sons*, and *A Family and a Fortune* focus on an upper-middle class family living in a somewhat dilapidated country house surrounded by its estate; in *Men and Wives* the Haslam house appears to be in rather better repair. Close by is a generic village, many of whose inhabitants are at least partially dependent on the family in the 'big house'.

The family lives together, and consists usually of parents and children of varying ages, sometimes adult; quite often there is a dependant relative such as a brother or sister of one of the parents, and grandparents too may still be living in the family property. Compton-Burnett accurately depicts these families and their houses as threatened and already crumbling, yet in most cases as clinging to the ideology and mores of the past: in the eyes of their social circle (and presumably of those 'beneath them') they appear to be continuing their lives of comfort and privilege.

The Judæo-Christian ideology which supposedly underpins Compton-Burnett's families in these novels is soon established. In three of them, (*A House and its Head*), (*Daughters and Sons*), (*Men and Wives*), readers meet the family at breakfast, which has been preceded by prayers; in *A Family and a Fortune* the family is at breakfast but no prayers are said. In *Pastors and Masters* the opening scene takes place in a boys' boarding school also at breakfast time, an unpleasantly discordant occasion involving both staff and pupils while they await the arrival of Mr. Herrick, the owner of the school, who will say prayers, and who is a close friend of two Anglican clergymen (and two academics). *Brothers and Sisters* opens with a lengthy description of Sir Andrew Stace and his property, during which he is seen to be at the head of his table and prayers are mentioned. The exception is *More Women than Men*; it may be assumed from the setting (a girls' boarding school and its staff) that the parents of the pupils are fairly affluent, as they pay for their daughters' education, and that they therefore subscribe to the accepted norms of the landed classes. However, the opening scene shows the headmistress welcoming her staff back after the holidays. Since there is considerable emphasis on the penny-pinching of the Merrys, who run the school in *Pastors and Masters*, it may be assumed that the parents of their pupils are not as affluent as those in *More Women than Men*.

The opening of *A House and its Head* presents a paradigm for the start of several of Compton-Burnett's novels; on the first page readers meet the Edgeworth family in the dining room of their 'eighteenth century house', in which the 'powerful manner of objects of the Victorian age' predominates; these objects seem 'in so doing to rank themselves with their possessor' (5). Readers are immediately aware that the novel is set in the Victorian era, in an inherited country house and its surrounding estate, and that the protagonist is a family of the landed gentry. They infer also the dominance of the patriarch, the squire. On occasion the 'squire' is replaced by a member of the professions or by someone who has been 'in trade', thus reflecting the encroachment of such areas of employment into what had been the domain of the landed classes; the incoming family, however, aspires to lead the same kind of life as the 'gentry', in essence, to join their class.

Not long after the opening of *A House and its Head*, readers are faced with one of the predicaments of the landed gentry, and a common theme in Compton-Burnett's work: their declining revenue. Grant, Duncan Edgeworth's nephew and heir, is 'reading for the Bar, [but] in an easy spirit, as his future was secure' (8); unfortunately, his ease of spirit is not justified, as the value of the Edgeworths' family income 'had lessened with the depression of the land, and the house was run on women servants' (23). Like Felix Bacon (in *More Women than Men*), Grant is clearly reluctant to address the possible necessity of future paid employment. The extent to which this decline in prosperity was happening is illustrated by the need of several sons (and sometimes their fathers) of Compton-Burnett's families to undertake some kind of paid employment: Matthew Haslam (*Men and Wives*)—whose father has in any case been in trade—has become a doctor; the Gaveston family's plight (*A Family and a Fortune*) is emphasised by the preparation of the

younger son for a profession, although they manage to keep a butler; they would love to allow their 'poor relations' to live in the dower-house rent-free but cannot quite afford it; the relations themselves – Blanche's father and spinster sister – have been forced to sell their property. 'Poor Latimer' (*Brothers and Sisters*) (whose father is a doctor) is forced to accept any work he can find; ironically, it is in the office of an estate agent who will undoubtedly be selling the Stace house and any other similar mansions of the neighbourhood. The impact of Dudley's (*A Family and a Fortune*) 'fortune' is manifest: the first decision with regard to the spending of his money is that some should be used for the maintenance of the decaying family home, after which he alleviates his family's financial difficulties by making some of his money over to them individually. However, the golden egg has been laid too late for Clement, who has lived with constant financial struggle. His father suggests that his miserly streak 'may be the result of too little to spare all his life' (*A Family and a Fortune* 284), which has led to his becoming harsh and resentful. A similar upbringing is suggested by Cassie at the end of *A House and its Head* as the reason for Sibyl's wickedness. She describes Sibyl's life as one 'in which succession had loomed too large' (228). The over-riding motivation in the manipulative Sibyl's life has always been to secure an inheritance for herself, first in the shape of Almeric Bode, and later, having married her cousin Grant, in the shape of his succession; the Edgeworth estate's rents may be diminishing, but for Sibyl they would no doubt be better than no rents at all (*A House and its Head* 228). The reliance of the Ponsonby family on John's earnings, his own repeated emphasis on his efforts, and the impact of France's two gifts of £1,000 (and their bare sufficiency) all make clear the considerable strain under which the family lives; on the occasion of a visit from family friends, in order to 'keep up appearances', 'some rugs and cushions had been laid about which would be removed in the morning' (*Daughters and Sons* 155).

Andrew Stace, at the end of *Brothers and Sisters*, reveals that he and his sister are struggling to maintain their family home: ‘...we are thinking of a simple, open escape... Of giving up the struggle here, with death duties and everything...’ (*Brothers and Sisters* 254). The former tradesman Sir Godfrey Haslam (*Men and Wives*) is an exception: as he admires the portraits of his parents, who (he knows) are happy to see him ‘set up in a different way from themselves’ (6), he reassures his butler that he is not ashamed of his heritage (*ibid.*). (Ironically, his butler is.) Sir Godfrey’s wife Harriet’s ‘older blood’ appears to have brought with it a degree of financial acumen: it is she who manages the family budget, despite her husband’s success in trade. When Sir Godfrey is left in charge, it is apparent that his largesse exceeds their means; once again, appearances belie reality. The opening pages of *Pastors and Masters* reveal the same predicament as for these landed families: the penny-pinching attitude of the Merrys to the housekeeping is in contrast to their self-presentation to their pupils’ parents. The ironic tone of the novels is thus soon evident: these families, and the schools to which they send their children, reveal the discrepancy between what is expected of their class and the reality.

At the head of the Edgeworth family, Duncan seeks to guide his dependents, who include Ellen his wife, two daughters of twenty-four and seventeen, and Grant, along the path established by the Church. The Edgeworths appear to their neighbours as a model family with a model patriarch at its head. They are seen at church every Sunday, where after service they engage in pleasantries with the small number of their social equals, which includes the rector, Oscar Jekyll, and his mother, whose daughter Cassie has been the governess of the Edgeworth daughters and is now Ellen’s companion; it is made clear that the Jekylls have come from good stock but have fallen on hard times and are forced to take in paying pupils as boarders. The

rector, as a non-believer, is hardly appropriate for his calling, but he is, unlike some of his counterparts in other novels, a sympathetic character. The doctor and his family are members of the group, as are two families of independent means, one, a widower, with his spinster daughter and niece, the other a married couple with a grown-up son and daughter; the same people are entertained as guests on occasion. The ladies of the 'big house', like the other ladies of their acquaintance, participate in good works centred on the village church. It is clear that the family is the focus of social life for their friends and neighbours; it is equally clear that despite Duncan's strenuous efforts the Edgeworths are not easily led, a state of affairs brought forcefully home to the reader when it emerges that Grant has tricked his aunt into buying him a book which is 'inimical to the faith of the day' (*A House and its Head* 10), and which is burned by Duncan. Ironically, Duncan himself has read the book 'from cover to cover', despite the fact that 'on every page there is poison' (*ibid.*).

It has been said already that the finances of the Gavestons (*A Family and a Fortune*) are also stretched; they are renting out their gate house to Blanche's father and sister who have been forced to sell their property. *A Family and a Fortune* is the story of a family in similar circumstances to the Edgeworths, the dependent nephew being replaced by a younger brother, Dudley, who helps his older brother, Edgar, to manage the estate. There are four 'children' in the family: two grown-up sons, a grown-up daughter, and a fifteen-year-old son who is disabled. The family is not seen to frequent church, but the daughter, Justine, engages in good works in the parish, and Dudley intends that part of his 'fortune', the impact of which further demonstrates the family's impecuniousness, should be similarly used. The Gavestons' social life is even more restricted than the Edgeworths', the friends and

neighbours being replaced by Blanche's father and unmarried sister, the jealous and spiteful Matty, and an occasional visit from Mr. and Mrs. Middleton.

*Men and Wives* offers another example of late Victorian upper middle class life, though with the significant difference that Sir Godfrey Haslam 'had had to choose' his estate, since his fortune has been amassed in trade (5); his wife, the deeply religious Harriet, however, 'was of better family' and 'older blood' (7); she suffers from mental ill-health. The Haslams have a butler, who despises his master's origins, in addition to other servants, and they and their adult children (a daughter and three sons, the eldest of whom, Matthew, is a medical researcher) entertain the local gentry, including the rector and the doctor, and patronise parish activities. There is another apparently landed family in the neighbourhood, the Hardistys; Rachel is Sir Percy's second wife, and has served as mother to the two daughters of her predecessor. A family lawyer, the obsequious Dominic Spong, appears for the first time in Compton-Burnett's novels; he is a minor character but serves as a precursor to others of his profession in subsequent novels. A noteworthy detail is that Sir Godfrey is particularly profligate whilst his wife is much more capable in the management of their affairs. A significant character is the Reverend Ernest Bellamy, married to – and in the process of being divorced from – Camilla, a flighty young woman with whom Matthew later falls passionately in love. *Daughters and Sons* has as head of the Ponsonby family a well-known novelist, John, who is now struggling to retain his readership. Sabine, his mother, a redoubtable matriarch, is still alive at the beginning of the novel; she is assisted by her unmarried daughter, Hester (Hetty), whose prime function in life is as amanuensis to her brother, to whom she is unhealthily devoted, and who suffers a nervous breakdown and fakes her suicide. There are five Ponsonby children, two adult women, two teenage boys who are still

studying, and an eleven-year-old girl. The second daughter, Frances (France) is already showing promise as a novelist, though her father, at the beginning of the novel, does not know this. There is also a succession of governesses, one of whom marries John, and one tutor. Once again the family entertains their small social circle for whom they are the centre of interest, and which includes the rector, another in Compton-Burnett's gallery of unappealing clergymen, the doctor (and his twin sister Charity, a camp and eccentric writer), and a baronet, with his son and heir and sister. The frequent reprimands of the children by Sabine with regard to the cost of their board and lodging, together with John's expressions of concern about his income and his gratitude for the two anonymous gifts of £1 000 (from France, the proceeds from her first novel), once again paint a picture of financial hardship.

*Pastors and Masters* has as three of its main characters three clergymen, the two Fletchers, who are uncle and nephew, and the Reverend Henry Bentley, who has never practised his calling and who has two sons at the school. There is also a noteworthy, and very religious, spinster, the sister of the elder Fletcher. The other major characters are connected with the school or the university; the dons are friends of the owner of the school. *More Women than Men* is alone among the novels in this study in lacking any focus on the Church or the practice of religion. There is, however, a non-practising and overtly homosexual clergyman, the Reverend Jonathan Swift, whose parents, 'realising that he bore the name of a famous man, had given him also the Christian name, by way of giving him all in their power towards equality' (21). Living with Jonathan as his lover is his forty-year-old former pupil, Felix Bacon, the heir to a baronetcy. There is also William Fane, a minor character who, with Dominic Spong (*Men and Wives*), is one of the early representations of the legal profession in Compton-Burnett's novels. The social lives of the inhabitants of

these two schools are almost completely restricted to their fellow-inhabitants; however, in *More Women than Men* there is a departure from the usual settings of Compton-Burnett's novels: the scene shifts from the school to Felix's estate, which he inherits.

Within their local community, the Edgeworths (*A House and its Head*) are accustomed to setting an example (as they and their neighbours see it) by taking their place in Church, led by Duncan and with Grant taking up the collection. After the service, the neighbours cluster round what is clearly the focal point of the gathering, the Edgeworth family. Duncan is perceived as properly carrying out his role, with Ellen as his helpmeet. In Chapter 3 of *Daughters and Sons* the reader meets the Marcons and the Seymours, for whom the Ponsonby family is clearly the prime source of interest. Again, the Ponsonbys are seen fulfilling their obligations by attending a play in the village hall. That the Gavestons, in *A Family and a Fortune*, are the main focus of local social life is demonstrated by the avid interest taken by the village gossip, Mrs. Middleton, in all their doings. In *Men and Wives*, the Haslams – in the shape of Sir Godfrey, during his wife's absence – generously support parish activities, whilst Harriet, who usually leads the Dorcas group, is sedulously courted by Mrs. Christie and only slightly less obviously by Agatha Calkin and her sisters. In *Brothers and Sisters* Sophia dutifully, but not graciously, plays hostess to her poorer relatives and her neighbours. In *Pastors and Masters*, it is the headmaster's ability to present himself appropriately to the parents which appears to enable the school to thrive, whilst Josephine Napier (*More Women than Men*) is at pains to paint her school in the most flattering light on parents' days. In every case, public perception of the family or of those who represent them is seriously at odds with what readers perceive only too clearly.

The families appear to be cut off from national and international events, including the potential consequences for their stratum of society, preferring to remain blind to the decline in the unassailability of their rights and privileges and the underlying causes of their reduced incomes. Their attendance at church and their participation in activities centred on it appear to take place for their own benefit rather than out of any deeply felt spirituality; sometimes one of the women visits the sick and aged, but none of the men goes hunting or is Master of Foxhounds, and they are never seen in the assembly rooms or at the Hunt Ball. Sibyl's aunt's house where she plots her rehabilitation (*A House and its Head*), Felix Bacon's ancestral home to which he takes his bride (*More Women than Men*), Harriet Haslam's hospital (*Men and Wives*), the farm where Dudley Gaveston recuperates (*A Family and a Fortune*) – none merits any description or even identification by name or location. Miss Charity Marcon's visits to the British Museum merit no more than a mention (*Daughters and Sons*), while the absences of John and Hetta in the same novel are never located. At the beginning of term, the teachers in *More Women than Men* travel back from unnamed places, an occasional son is studying in Oxford or Cambridge in order to prepare for an unwanted profession, and in *A House and its Head* readers are told that Grant and Sibyl have been to Italy for their honeymoon, but they do not follow them there. The impending move to London by the Staces, entailing the abandonment of their ancestral home and the relocation from the village by their friends, is unique in Compton-Burnett's work (as is the naming of the village), yet there is no mention of neighbourhoods or houses in London, and the reader does not follow them (*Brothers and Sisters*). Such scarcity of geographical or spatial detail intensifies the sense of isolation of these family groups, marooning them even more inescapably in their houses. In two of the novels discussed here (*A House and its Head*, *A Family and a Fortune*), there is unfavourable description of a

lesser house when compared with the inherited family home, despite the latter's frequently noted state of disrepair.

In the first few pages of three of the novels under discussion here (*A House and its Head*, *Daughters and Sons*, *A Family and a Fortune*) readers are presented with a kind of *tableau vivant*: a Victorian-Edwardian family, gathered round the breakfast table; they are at prayer. Readers are introduced to what appears to be a model family of the era, the paterfamilias, his wife and helpmeet, and their children. *Brothers and Sisters* differs slightly in that Sir Andrew is a widower, and readers have to wait briefly before discovering the time of day. Yet the irony of the tableau soon becomes apparent: readers are almost immediately aware of the disjuncture between appearance and reality: in all four families discord is apparent. In *A House and its Head* and *Daughters and Sons* the tone in which prayers are said is wholly inappropriate; in *Men and Wives* Sir Godfrey's declamatory delivery is at odds not only with the tone which readers know his wife would prefer but is also inadvertently revealing of disagreement within his family which is immediately apparent after the prayers. In these same few pages, expectations are disappointed. Readers discern hints of the incongruities which will reveal themselves so glaringly as the novels progress. They are alerted to the incompatibility of the façade with the crumbling edifice behind it, privileged as they are to see and hear all that happens beneath, as well as on, the surface of such family life. Duncan and Ellen Edgeworth (*A House and its Head*) wait for their daughters and their nephew (and heir) to come down to breakfast on Christmas morning: a family scene at the moment of the celebration that lies at the heart of the religious and moral framework in which such families have their place, and which they purportedly embody. Yet the cosy warmth is quickly dispelled by Duncan's cruelty to his wife and her inability to withstand his

onslaughts. She visibly fights to safeguard her mental well-being; her struggle is indicated twice by the narrative voice in her inability to answer her husband's questions (p.6), and by the relief in her tone of voice (p.7); a few pages later we see her 'stumbling over the words and withdrawing her eyes from her husband' (p.11), sighing wearily (p.12), and covering her eyes with her hands (p.14); finally, before the dreadful scene ends on p. 16, readers are told that 'Ellen's eyes filled with tears' (p.15). (A little later, readers are reminded of her state of mind four times on p.34, as she fights her exhaustion.) The arrival of the 'children' has done nothing to reassure the reader: it is clear that Nance and her father are in bitter opposition, that the manipulative and unfeeling Sibyl is his favourite, and that the nephew Grant, heir for lack of a son (itself a seed of disappointment and an indication of decreasing family numbers), finds it difficult to accommodate himself to his situation and to his uncle's rod of iron. The opening pages of *Daughters and Sons* present the reader with Sabine Ponsonby and her grandchildren arriving for breakfast. They are soon followed into the room by the victimised governess, Miss Bunyan. Again, readers' expectations are betrayed: a traditional family scene is belied by evidence of internal strife and by the irreligious manner of prayer. In this novel the head of the family is, appropriately, absent in the first chapter: a well-meaning but self-centred man, he has delegated his responsibility for the upbringing of his children to his aged and tyrannical mother. He is attended in his novel-writing by his devoted sister Hetta, who, as a woman, might be expected to soften her mother's harsh discipline. But Hetta is her mother's daughter: both women are the antithesis of 'the angel in the house'. Again, readers are presented with a striking contradiction between expectation and actuality. When Hetta fakes her suicide her mother is distraught, blaming herself for failing her daughter in allowing her to sacrifice herself for her brother; yet readers realise that

Sabine has been unable to step outside her own commitment to the patriarchal order, which requires self-sacrifice from both mother and daughter (see Part Two, Ch. 4).

*A Family and a Fortune* opens with a similar tableau, a family at breakfast. The dissension amongst the members of the Gaveston family is not as acute as in the case of the Edgeworths or the Ponsonbys, though Aubrey's uneasy vulnerability is revealed, as is Clement's resentful dissatisfaction; the reader is also made aware that Blanche is frequently on edge and easily flustered. Perhaps more significantly, the inseparability of Edgar and his brother Dudley is apparent. The arrival of Blanche's sister, the vain, spoilt and vicious Matty, is one strain too many for the rather perilous equilibrium of the family. Compton-Burnett has depicted another family which does not conform to the ideal; a family in which the mother strives to be, but does not succeed in being 'the angel in the house', and a paterfamilias who, though he does his duty as best he can, owes his primary allegiance to his brother.

In *Men and Wives* it is not long before family breakfast takes place, preceded by prayers led by Sir Godfrey; cracks in the family façade are as obvious as in the above three novels: none of the children wants to follow their mother's advice with regard to their careers, and there are further grounds for dissension in each case. *Pastors and Masters*, opening with grace before breakfast in a school, presents readers with a similar tableau which offers the ideal opportunity for the expression of genuine religious feeling, but is as lacking in Christian spirit as the above four novels. At the beginning of *More Women than Men* another ironic scene is played out as readers meet the headmistress (and owner) of a boarding school, Josephine Napier, whose polished but hypocritical consideration for her staff belies her iron-willed manipulativeness.

Readers' insights penetrate the families' presentation of themselves as the model of their class and time to their social circle, who are unaware of the callousness or cruelty of such figures as Duncan Edgeworth and Hetta Ponsonby, the egotistical arrogance of Sophia Stace and Josephine Napier, the unhappiness and the weakness (or perhaps cowardice) of the oppressed, leading to loss of self-worth and identity, and in the case of Ellen Edgeworth and Blanche Gaveston, of the will to live.

*Brothers and Sisters* departs from the usual pattern of Compton-Burnett's family novels; it opens with a lengthy and ironic introduction to Sir Andrew Stace in which the mockery of the narrative voice subverts the notion of the paterfamilias:

Andrew Stace was accustomed to say, that no man had ever despised him, and no man had ever broken him in... It was true that no man had despised him... It was also true that no-one had broken him in, if by this he meant that all had given up effort to improve him, few had loved him, and none were at ease in his presence.' (1)

Sir Andrew's view of gender roles is presented to the reader in the second sentence of the novel: 'The omission of woman from his statement was due to his omission of her from his conception of executive life' (ibid.). However, his view is undermined almost immediately after its presentation, as the narrative voice emphasises Sophia's resemblance to her father in both physical and emotional terms. Thus readers are forewarned by the narrator of the irony that Sir Andrew's characteristics are going to manifest themselves not in a son but in his daughter: they wonder how the potential subversion of paternalistic assumptions and characteristics is going to reveal itself. (For the character and significance of Sophia Stace, see Chapter 4: Gender Issues: Women).

Happy sister-brother relationships feature in several Compton-Burnett novels. In *Brothers and Sisters* there are four in addition to the Staces: the Wakes, the Drydens, the Langs, and the Latimers. However, three of them separate at the end of the novel, all, including the homosexual Julian Wake (see Chapter 3, Gender Issues: Men) in order to get married, unable to resist societal pressures to conform to the norms of their class and time.

There are three adult children in the Stace family, two sons and a daughter, and in addition there is a family of 'poor relations': Peter, also a doctor, and his two adult children. The Staces lead a similar social life to the families already mentioned, their circle including the rector and his sister, both unmarried, and a brother and sister of independent means, Julian and Sarah Wake, who are also unmarried; there are three newcomers to the village – a rare event in Compton-Burnett's work – a widow and her adult son and daughter, who, it appears, are related to the Staces by dint of the fact that the widow is Christian's mother. It is clear that Sophia is familiar with the rituals of the Anglican Church. Evident also is that whilst the first few pages of this novel create the impression of a traditional late Victorian family, Sir Andrew's death is only the forerunner of further disintegration.

The ending of *Brothers and Sisters* is unique among these seven novels, in that the 'landed' family abandons their 'land', thus opting out of the patriarchal system. The naming of the village, which is unique in Compton-Burnett's entire work, specifying a particular place, seems to indicate its actual existence and thus emphasises the abandonment by the younger generation of all that they have known as they embark on their new life. The 'new life' will be in London, as far distant from Moreton Edge, socially and emotionally, as it is possibly for such a family to be.

In this novel in which several of the ‘brothers and sisters’ marry at the end, Dinah and Andrew Stace remain ‘wedded’ to each other, but they, and Robin, will embark on a new life in London, where they will be joined by their good friend Julian and his new wife, a life radically divergent from that of their forebears and their class.

The disintegration of not only the houses of these families but also of their status, in essence their *déclassement*, might well be said to entail the parallel disintegration of their internal dynamic. During his recovery from his illness, Dudley Gaveston (*A Family and a Fortune*) expresses his feelings about what he describes as ‘beautiful family talk, mean and worried and full of sorrow and spite and excitement’ (282): ‘I cannot be asked to miss it in my weak state. I should only fret’ (282). Not only has there been the ‘talk’ of the discovery of Clement’s miserliness, but also the character of Matty Seton might be said to be a perfect illustration of ‘sorrow, spite and excitement’. Mean and spiteful ‘family talk’ occurs in most of these seven novels: Sophia’s children do not hesitate to express their reactions to her, to each other and even to their friends (*Brothers and Sisters*), whilst in *Men and Wives* Matthew’s remarks to his mother and Camilla’s to her husband more than satisfy Dudley’s definition of family talk. Josephine, the head of the household in *More Women than Men*, is far too subtle to engage in such talk but succeeds in manipulating her ‘family’ by her very subtlety. Henry Bentley, Duncan Edgeworth, and Sabine and Hetta Ponsonby (*Pastors and Masters, A House and its Head, Daughters and Sons*) know no bounds in flaying their relatives with their words: Dudley’s adjectives are almost too anodyne to serve as an apt description of their callous cruelty. Such words and behaviour scarcely suggest the mutual love and support supposedly embodied in the ideal family. Lucariello’s observer, the reader,

has seen not only the dialogue between the family members but has also had the benefit of the narrator's input in order to appreciate the situation in which these families find themselves: enclosed within their own domain, having not much in the way of interest or activity, and struggling financially.

The wide-reaching socio-historical and economic revisions which were underway across the world may have been beyond the control of these families of the English landed gentry, but on a smaller scale, action by their own agency within the family was not impossible. The men of the landed families considered themselves, and were considered by others, to be an essential element in the framework of society. Yet, unlike actual members of their class, Compton-Burnett's patriarchs have not taken steps to supplement the family fortunes in order to maintain their estate; none has shared his responsibilities with his wife, other than by spending her fortune. Whatever capital they still have does not appear to be invested in the developing industries or railways. They rarely move outside the confines of their estates: despite their evidently straitened financial circumstances they do not set out to seek their fortune, nor do any of them enter the armed forces or government or colonial services: the wider context of nation and Empire seldom intrudes. They do not even participate in the running of their local offices and social affairs. Convinced of their position, and of their rights and privileges, they remain immured in their houses, looking back to the times of their forebears, committed to their belief in their rights and responsibilities as an integral and essential part of the structure of society. Readers do not even see them concerning themselves with their tenants' livelihoods. Only in *A Family and a Fortune* do readers glimpse any concern from the squire about his tenants: Dudley Gaveston – not the patriarch – intends to devote some of his 'fortune' to the wellbeing of his elder brother's tenants; readers learn from his

reference to having visited some of their cottages with Edgar that he remembers their plight. (The women of the families, including Justine in this case, are seen to participate in 'good works'.) These 'pillars of the establishment', supposedly ranking just below the aristocracy as the pool which furnishes the nation's leaders, appear to lack the will to take positive steps in the struggle for their own survival. Readers picture them withdrawing behind their barricades, resolutely fending off the encroaching hordes of 'unsuitable' classes.

They remain closeted in their homes, however crumbling, scrimping and saving in order to maintain the appearance of the status which they have previously enjoyed. Their concern for their own property is illustrated by Justine Gaveston (*A Family and a Fortune*) when her uncle comes into his inheritance; her words express not only the impending (in some cases actual) deterioration of the property but also the attitudes of family members to it:

I should be glad for something to be done for the dear old house, to prevent its falling into decay. I have long wished that its faithful service could be repaid. It would be a relief to Father, who sees it as a life trust and not as his own in any personal sense, so that he would not really be taking anything for himself. And Mark [the heir] feels about it in the same way. Yes, I think I may say that we should all be grateful for succour for the fine old walls which have sheltered us and our forebears. (112)

Compton-Burnett presents to her readers a series of landed families and their offspring, mercilessly and minutely depicted, fighting to retain the status quo: their own status in the face of inevitable change. The events outlined in the first section of this chapter are beyond her protagonists' control; the decades which follow the action of the novels see the wholesale transfer of land; these families are the

precursors of the movement which led to suffragettism, civil unrest, and the cataclysm which was the First World War. Confronted by this deluge of change, Compton-Burnett's protagonists are helpless to prevent it. This kind of helplessness in the face of historical forces satisfies several definitions of irony. Readers realise that the situation of these landed families is not as they perceive it to be: they delude themselves by believing in their ability to stave off the disintegration of their traditional way of life; moreover, their friends and neighbours collude with them in their delusion; during the decades of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the landed gentry families of Compton-Burnett's novels experience Lucariello's 'world's undependability' (Gibbs and Colston 468), and will find that they cannot 'rely on themselves' (ibid.) The reader recognises Shelley's progression from surprise to sadness (ibid. 567) as s/he realises that the situation of Compton-Burnett's families will almost certainly 'turn out contrary' (ibid.) to their expectation. Muecke's 'juxtaposition of incompatibles' (42) is clearly discernible: the situation of the landed classes is not tenable, the 'old order' cannot survive alongside the new, brought about by such wholesale and radical revisions of national and international society.

The multi-layered ironies of the situation in which Compton-Burnett's families – and indeed, the class to which they belong – find themselves are communicated to any reader possessed of a sense of irony. Shelley's explanation of emotional responses generated by the perception of irony is pertinent here. The initial surprise (on the part of the reader) aroused by the ironic presentation of the callousness and cruelty of Duncan, Sabine, and Hetta, of the egocentricity of Matty and Sophia, and of Josephine's manipulative ruthlessness, is soon transmuted into anger; Harriet's emotional blackmail engenders a surprise which is soon distilled into horror; in the case of Ellen's and Miss Griffin's fearful dependence and Aubrey's and Dudley's

emotional insecurity, readers' surprise quickly turns to pity. These new emotions serve to reinforce the salience of the irony for the reader. The despair that Shelley suggests as another typical secondary emotion (567) is familiar to readers of Compton-Burnett, as they are faced with the probability that the predicaments in which the families are embroiled are inescapable. His proposition that perhaps only when poetic justice is achieved does satisfaction or happiness ensue from the perception of irony (*ibid.*) is particularly apposite in interpreting Compton-Burnett's novels, where poetic justice, or closure of any kind, is usually absent.

Pamela Hansford Johnson was not the only reviewer to react uneasily to the move towards realism in Compton-Burnett's work (see Introduction, p. 3). Hansford Johnson was troubled by the lack of poetic justice, which is not overtly indicated either by the characters or the narrator in Compton-Burnett's work. Her characters must continue to live with the knowledge of what they and the others members of the family have done; that knowledge is punishment enough. Readers remember Francis King's perception of Compton-Burnett's 'view of life':

Her view of human existence is certainly one totally without illusions,  
morally stern and stoical in its endurance of the tragedies that befell her.

Compton-Burnett's ironic narration requires the reader to perceive her own strategies for enduring what life throws at us.

### Chapter 3 Gender Issues: Men (*see Introduction, p. 10*)

#### a) The position of the patriarch

(For an understanding of the role of a patriarch of the landed gentry in late Victorian England, see Part Two, Ch.2, b), c), d).) Those individuals of the same class who had not inherited the family property and estate and who remained at home living in idleness or assisting their elder brothers were expected to conform to the prevailing notions of honour and decency, as were the many who served in the Church, the armed forces, or the colonial and diplomatic services.

For other ‘gentlemen’—professional men and industrialists who emulated the landed and titled classes—the expected codes of behaviour were naturally those of the class they aspired to join. Members of this latter group who were not successful enough to harbour such aspirations were nonetheless considered acceptable; doctors, lawyers, and those who served in the armed forces and the colonial and diplomatic services mingled socially with the gentry. It must not be forgotten, however, that the last decades of the nineteenth century saw radical changes not only with regard to the landed class but also, and inevitably, a strong challenge to the concept of patriarchy itself.

In the light of the above, it is interesting to consider the portrait of a ‘man’ which emerges from Coventry Patmore’s poem *The Angel in the House*, published in 1854, which is reproduced below. The poem is intended to express the qualities of the ideal wife as embodied in Patmore’s own wife; it will be analysed with this in mind in the chapter titled *Gender Issues: Women*. However, it is salutary to examine the implications of the poem for men. The poem both reflected, and exerted considerable influence on, prevailing *mores* during the mid-Victorian era, and

continued to do so long afterwards. Queen Victoria's apparent devotion to her husband and to family life encouraged the spread of the ideal embodied in the poem, which describes the ideal wife's qualities and the husband–wife relationship; in so doing it reveals what Patmore (and presumably others of his time) clearly accepts as the husband's behaviour and attitudes.

1 Man must be pleased; but him to please

2 Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf

3 Of his condoled necessities

4 She casts her best, she flings herself.

5 How often flings for nought, and yokes

6 Her heart to an icicle or whim,

7 Whose each impatient word provokes

8 Another, not from her, but him;

9 While she, too gentle even to force

10 His penitence by kind replies,

11 Waits by, expecting his remorse,

12 With pardon in her pitying eyes;

13 And if he once, by shame oppress'd,

14 A comfortable word confers,

15 She leans and weeps against his breast,

16 And seems to think the sin was hers;  
17 Or any eye to see her charms,  
18 At any time she's still his wife,  
19 Dearly devoted to his arms;  
20 She loves with love that cannot tire;  
21 And when, ah woe, she loves alone,  
22 Through passionate duty love springs higher,  
23 As grass grows taller round a stone.

The unequivocal statement in line 1 is the expression of Patmore's belief with regard to the position of men in the society of his day; his needs, it seems, are ordained from above, as is that which constitutes his wife's pleasure. However, there are further implications in the remaining lines. The 'necessities' which the ideal wife is happy to satisfy are sometimes regretted (his wife 'condoles' with him), and are thus perhaps not necessary at all; moreover, she is expected to comfort her husband, who is cold, capricious, and impatient, but does not apologise for these faults (lines 5-8). If he should perhaps feel ashamed of one of his actions, he is expected to do nothing more than apologise briefly and allow his wife to take responsibility for the deed (lines 13-16). The value-laden vocabulary creates the impression of a husband as a creature of needs who cannot survive without wifely support. The portrait of the patriarch which emerges from these lines does not depict for readers the kind of 'hero' they have been led to believe is the normal aspiration for the upper middle class gentleman of the era; the man who emerges from the poem can scarcely survive without his wife. The extent to which Compton-Burnett's so-

called patriarchs depart from the ideal will become clear during the explorations (below) of Sir Andrew Stace, Duncan Edgeworth, Sir Godfrey Haslam, John Ponsonby, and Felix Bacon. Three anomalous cases will also be discussed.

## **b) The Novels**

Sir Andrew Stace's statement of his position with regard to women might be considered more apposite than Patmore's for the majority of the patriarchy: 'The omission of woman from his statement was due to his omission of her from his conception of executive life' (*Brothers and Sisters*, 1). In the novels under discussion in this thesis there are five which have as the protagonist an upper middle-class family living in its large house, which is, readers assume, surrounded by its estate: the Staces (*Brothers and Sisters*), the Haslams (*Men and Wives*), the Edgeworths (*A House and its Head*), the Ponsonbys (*Daughters and Sons*), and the Gavestons (*A Family and a Fortune*). In *Brothers and Sisters* the patriarch, Sir Andrew Stace, dies early in the novel, bequeathing his daughter Sophia not only a financial legacy but also his own strength of character; nevertheless, his estate goes to his illegitimate son Christian, clearly intending that he should be the squire. Christian, however, is not interested in, or capable of, occupying the role of squire and patriarch; readers are not surprised that it is the eminently capable Sophia (discussed in the following chapter) who fulfils the role. The paragraph which introduces Sir Andrew, and which provides readers with considerable insight into his daughter, has been analysed (see Part One, a)). Sir Andrew, the archetypal paterfamilias, naturally appoints his son as his heir; this son, however, is illegitimate, and moreover does not wish to be the squire, handing over his responsibilities to his wife: already cracks are apparent in the edifice of family and estate. A third is apparent: it is a woman – his daughter – who inherits from Sir Andrew the characteristics and temperament which

fitted him, and which fit her, to fulfil the role of squire and patriarch. Sir Andrew considers his daughter to be physically attractive; just as important, however, are her strengths of character and temperament, which are in ironic contrast to her father's opinion of women.

In *Men and Wives* Sir Godfrey Haslam's success in trade has enabled him to join the landed classes; readers meet him at the beginning of the novel, revelling in his house and his estate: 'Standing here in front of my house, I feel as young as when I moved into it...' (*Men and Wives*, 5). After greeting his butler, he continues: '... I feel proud of my home, of my wife, of my sons and my daughter, my menservants and my maidservants, and the stranger that is within my gate. I take a satisfaction in my possessions' (ibid. 6). Shortly afterwards he carries out the conventional function of the paterfamilias, leading morning prayers at breakfast time. However, his dissenter's prayers are very different from the traditional Anglican formulæ. From the narrator's slightly mocking presentation of Sir Godfrey, readers infer two worrying and uncharacteristic flaws in this pretender to the landed classes: those born to inherited land do not flaunt their inheritance, and their religion is usually displayed in the formal rituals of the Anglican Church.

Despite his success in business, it is his wife Harriet who takes care of the household finances, aided by the family lawyer, Dominic Spong. This is perhaps explained by the fact that she is 'of older blood' and therefore, we assume, more accustomed to the financial aspects of an estate than her husband. When she is hospitalised Godfrey spends their money extravagantly, lavishly entertaining and patronising parish activities, to the extent that Harriet discovers that they are in financial difficulty when she returns home. It is not only with money that Godfrey is foolish. He is vain, his vanity resulting in his inability to resist the flattery of the

flighty Camilla (the rector's ex-wife), who deliberately manipulates his weakness in order to ridicule him. At the end of the novel Harriet's will reveals that if Godfrey marries again he will forfeit her wealth and possessions. Godfrey convinces himself that she has made this stipulation because she is so devoted to him that she cannot bear to share him, even after her death, with another woman. Sir Godfrey's vanity with regard to his person and to his house and estate, his inability to manage the family finances, his extravagant prayers, his inability to resist feminine wiles – all of these weaknesses speak of a man far removed from the ideal: it is fair to say that as a squire he cuts an incongruous figure. There is considerable irony in the contrast between Sir Godfrey's version of the patriarch and the ideal, a contrast which itself underlines more conservative values in this text.

Duncan Edgeworth (*A House and its Head*) has already been presented in the discussion of the novel in the section titled *Class and Family (Novels)*. He appears to himself and to his neighbours as a model paterfamilias. However, readers are soon aware of the dysfunction of this family. Duncan bullies his wife remorselessly: it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that she dies as a result of her husband's treatment of her. He is also harshly critical of his daughters and his nephew, though allowing himself to be 'bamboozled' by the manipulative Sibyl. His egocentrism allows him to disregard the feelings of Ellen's children, and he marries very soon after her death; readers are told that on meeting his second wife Duncan 'starved as he was of a normal life, had lost control of himself' (103). Even after Alison, his second wife, has absconded (with Almeric Bode) Duncan's iron will remains unbreakable and therefore his position unassailable: as the children discuss Alison's predicament, Sibyl expresses surprise that they are thinking of her and not their father. Cassie shrewdly assesses the situation: 'Your father has the power; the

helpless person has the pity; and it is a poor substitute' (148). Duncan, who has been to the Bodes' house to verify the situation, 'entered his house with his usual directions, and abated not a jot of his normal manner' (148). The narrative voice continues a few moments later: 'Duncan heard [Sibyl's comforting words] with a look of simple resolution. Thought of his wife had little place in his mind. His being was given to fear for the fame of his house. Anything was a matter of course that would save his family name' (148). With these words the narrator appears at first sight to express the credo of the landed gentleman: that it is his duty to safeguard his family, his property, his honour. Yet a closer look enables the reader to discern that it is his reputation, the 'fame' and the 'name', of these notions which he seeks to protect; he knows that to keep up 'appearances' is sufficient to safeguard the deference enjoyed by his class, and that such deference is 'on the whole voluntarily accorded, and not [based] on outright power and coercion' (Thompson, 272; already quoted in the section titled *Class and Family*). Like other members of the squirearchy, he realises that many weaknesses can be hidden behind 'appearances'.

Some time later, the astute Gretchen Jekyll discovers the truth about a letter sent by Marshall, a former nursemaid, to Duncan, explaining that Richard, Duncan and Alison's son, has a lock of white hair which is characteristic of Grant's family. Gretchen brings Marshall before the family to explain her 'early mischief' (the writing of the letter), during which Sibyl (now married to Grant) admits to having bribed Marshall, citing her heartbreak over Almeric as her reason. During her confession, 'Duncan allowed her [Sibyl's] hand to rest in his...' (207), revealing his readiness to allow himself to be 'bamboozled' again by his younger daughter. It is clear that Sibyl wrote the second letter also (bribing Marshall to murder Richard), but she herself tries to re-direct Duncan's mind to the first letter. Having asked Marshall

if she was resentful because of her dismissal and being told that she was, although she ‘was barely following his words’ (207), Duncan makes his mind up and speaks to the family:

‘This seems to me a primitive creature, in the grip of a bitterness of spirit. It is likely that the crime is her own, and that she contrived the envelope in case of discovery. Such people have their own cunning. And the early episode gave the suggestion....’ (208).

Marshall is escorted out, weeping, leaving Duncan to ask Gretchen for proof of her accusation, which she provides, concluding by asking what he calls proof, as ‘no-one saw her do it’ (208).

“It is proof”, said Duncan, turning to the window and tapping his hands upon the sill. “We owe you our gratitude.”

“Do you want any more?” said Gretchen, taking advantage of his back to direct her eyes to Sibyl.

“No, Mrs Jekyll,” said Sibyl.

“So that was what you did with your brooch” [Sibyl had paid Marshall], said Gretchen, guiding her backwards with her hand, and speaking with her face close to hers. ... “Now, if there is danger in the future to Cassie or Cassie’s child, remember the secret will not die with an old woman” (208,209).

A few moments later Gretchen reiterates, ‘I will see they [people] know’ (209).

Without the three extended attributions in this extract, readers would not realise that Duncan remains unaware of the full truth.

Duncan has already forgiven Sibyl, which Grant cannot do so easily, and Sibyl is banished to live with a convenient aunt (whose whereabouts we are not told). Again conveniently, the aunt dies, leaving Sibyl a considerable inheritance. She promptly writes home, offering what amounts to a series of bribes to various members of the family if only they will allow her return to the fold. They accept her conditions, urged to do so by Duncan, who refers to what he persists in believing is her only crime as an 'early stumble', and Sibyl duly returns to married life with Grant.

At the end of the novel, Duncan appears to believe himself to be in the same impregnable position as he was in at the start of the novel: 'Well, I am here to give you a word when you need it. You are all at my hand to be taught' (237). Duncan fails to realise that 'they' are not all 'here' to be taught: the wife he bullied is dead and he is married to the strong and intelligent Cassie, who knows how to manage him; Nance and Sibyl are now running their own households, the independent Oscar is now a member of the family, bringing his own strength to add to his wife's, whilst even the frivolous Grant has shown signs of morality. Just as significant is the fact, of which Duncan is unaware, that the friends and neighbours may well 'know' the truth, given to them by Gretchen before she dies. The equivocal ending of this novel has been discussed in the chapter *Class and Family*. The narrative voice has performed its usual supporting and enhancing role, and continues to do so until the end of the novel. To Sibyl's assertion that she is not afraid of Duncan, Nance responds that she must be exaggerating, leaving the narrative voice to issue the reminder: '...said Nance, forgetting that it was only of her father, that her sister need not be afraid' (237). Readers perceive the irony here: the patriarch has been bamboozled by the choric voice in the shape of Gretchen. Whether it is Dulcia whom

Gretchen tells, or only Oscar, Sibyl will be never be free from watching eyes, and Duncan will risk disillusion and damage to the 'fame of his house' (148).

John Ponsonby, in *Daughters and Sons*, is the patriarch by right of birth; however, he has been forced to write novels to supplement his income. Although he has been successful, his popularity has recently started to wane, and the welcome he gives to the two anonymous gifts of £1 000 reveals the extent of their bare adequacy. He is easily persuaded by his despotic mother that the governess Edith Haslam is the author of the play staged in the parish hall, which she has had published as a novel, thus being able to make the two gifts. Sabine assures him that Edith will welcome his proposal of marriage, which he then makes, and which is accepted. On learning that the author is his eldest daughter France, an unpleasant professional jealousy reveals itself: he resents his daughter's evident gift and her potential rivalry with himself: 'He dropped his hands and stared at his daughter, and renewed his clapping in a steady, even manner, seeming to compose himself under its cover' (99). John continues to grapple with his conscience in order to conquer his jealousy, artfully 'damning his daughter with faint praise' before succeeding. Moreover, despite marrying Edith under false pretences, he comes to appreciate her, and they settle down to a happy married life.

John has to a certain extent carried out the duties of a Victorian patriarch; he has housed his mother in their family home, and worked hard to support his family. However, he has largely handed over the responsibility for the upbringing of his children and for the running of his household to his aged and tyrannical mother and his sister, Hetta. To help him in his work he has to a considerable extent relied on the latter as his amanuensis, heedless of the sacrifice she is making (discussed in the section *Despotic Matriarchs*), and fails to realise her unhealthy devotion to him. He

struggles to realise that their relationship must end if he and his wife are to be happy; thus John finds a suitable replacement for his sister, though Hetta cannot so easily replace her brother.

Edgar Gaveston, in *A Family and a Fortune*, perhaps comes closest to embodying the ideal Victorian paterfamilias, though in recent years his estate has shrunk. Despite his daughter Justine's perception of him as a perfect father, his relationship with his children is disengaged and he is similarly distant from his wife, Blanche: we are told that Edgar regarded 'his wife with compassionate affection', and that 'they had come to be rather shy of each other' (18). His deepest emotion is reserved for his dependent brother Dudley ('Edgar's life was largely in his brother' (18)), although he finds it almost impossible to acknowledge this, and hurts Dudley deeply before the end of the novel. However, he is respected by his tenants and can be seen attending to estate business and occasionally visiting the poor among them. Readers' moderate respect for Edgar is threatened when he 'steals' Dudley's fiancée, Maria Sloane, while Dudley is away on business. Reconciliation proves difficult, but readers are convinced of Edgar's love for Dudley, as eventually is Dudley himself. Dudley, affectionate towards the whole family and brotherly and avuncular to Blanche and the children respectively, and concerned with the management of the estate even before he inherits his fortune, might be said to compensate for Edgar's shortcomings: the Gaveston family have benefited from their joint presence. Nor does the advent of Maria appear to threaten their equilibrium: perhaps an unorthodox joint patriarchy is presented here, but it is a patriarchy all the same.

The paterfamilias of the landed gentry are supposed to serve as ideal husbands and fathers: safeguarding their inheritance, observing their Christian beliefs, carrying out their responsibilities to the wider community and to queen and

country; and by all these means serve as models to their own and the lower classes. All of the patriarchs above fall short of this ideal: these ‘pillars of the establishment’ cannot support the edifice of their class and family. The discrepancy between the privileges they have enjoyed and the ideals to which they subscribe on the one hand, and on the other their many failings, including their complete inability to take action, are likely to generate anger and scorn in the reader. The irony is compounded by what might almost be seen as a refusal to perceive the inevitable consequences of their situation; the best ‘model’ amongst the above appears to be the Gaveston ‘partnership’, an irony in itself.

However, the ideal to which these patriarchs were supposed to aspire may be said to be almost as unattainable as that held up to their wives, which will be discussed in the next chapter. As the references to Harrison (38-39) and Thompson (272) in the previous chapter indicate, these patresfamilias, alone and unaided, were expected to be responsible for wife, children, household, estate, tenants; local duties such as the Bench; investment in the development of local industry; provision of younger brothers and sons to serve in the armed forces and the diplomatic, colonial, and government services; and investment, whether financial or by manpower, in the development of the Empire. They were expected to demonstrate high standards of personal behaviour and a high level of commitment to all of the above; and lastly, they had to be *seen* to do all this, which required attendance at, and participation in, many local events and activities. It is not surprising that the ideal is not achieved in these novels. The irony in the situation of the patriarchy, particularly in the adverse national and international conditions prevailing during the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, was that what was expected of them was barely possible but yet was still held to be the ideal.

**c) Divergence from the patriarchal ideal** (*see Introduction, pp. 27, 39*)

An even greater deviation from the ideal is Felix Bacon (*More Women than Men*). Readers are introduced to him in a speech he addresses to the Reverend Jonathan Swift, with whom he lives in an open homosexual relationship. The only physically descriptive elements in it are a reference to his 'long, pale hand' and another to his age: he is about to be forty-one (20). More physical details soon follow, however: Felix sees in the mirror 'his small, light frame, his smooth black hair, his narrow, green eyes, his pale narrow face, his prominent, narrow features, and his subtle, alert expression' (20). The repetition of *narrow*, together with other value-laden vocabulary (when describing facial features) such as *small, light, pale* (itself repeated), and *prominent*, hardly suggest a model of the ideal patriarch. Since Compton-Burnett frequently notes family resemblances, readers wonder whether in this case also some of Felix's features resemble those of his family, and speak to the variation of the Bacon family from the strong, stalwart physical ideal. In the last phrase of the above sentence, however, the narrator strongly suggests a mind by no means lacking in intelligence or insight.

Felix is a camp and homosexual drawing master living with the non-practising Anglican clergyman Jonathan Swift, who is the brother of Josephine Napier. Josephine owns and runs a girls' boarding school on whose premises Jonathan and Felix live. Felix's first speech reveals that he is entirely dependent on his father, who appears to write to him annually on his birthday in a letter which reproaches him for his dependency; in the comments the letter elicits from Felix, he reveals that he is both whimsical and witty.

The appearance of Jonathan Swift is in marked contrast to that of Felix, thus emphasising it, and the information that Felix has lived with Jonathan for twenty-two

years after becoming his pupil at age eighteen removes any remaining doubts as to the relationship between the two. Indeed, both men express this relationship overtly; Jonathan speaks of ‘the one I love’ (22), and Felix ‘danced towards Jonathan and took a seat on his knee, the older man moving his arm as if accustomed to the position’ (26). Jonathan is discussed in the chapter on the Church.

Felix’s camp and flippant wit continues to be noteworthy throughout the novel. When Jonathan comments that Felix’s father does not sound ‘addicted to work himself’ Felix’s rejoinder is both quick and quick-witted: ‘Of course he is not addicted to work. Please do not speak unsuitably about my father’ (23). He further demonstrates the disdain for paid employment frequently found amongst members of the landed classes: to assuage Gabriel’s (Jonathan’s son) discomfort at his present unemployed state, Felix reassures him: ‘That is the worst of a temporary arrangement ... One is never at ease. It is better to make it permanent’ (35). He reports what his father has said on the phone in response to his son’s taking up a post as art teacher in a girls’ school: ‘that if I choose to behave in an undignified manner for a pittance, it is my own affair. That is the best definition of work I have heard’ (43). When William Fane implies that he understands his father’s surprise, Felix tells him, ‘To me any work seems odd for a gentleman’ (43); Fane is a lawyer lodging in Jonathan’s house; Felix’s last comment is a sly dig at his profession.

One of Felix’s first actions is to approach Josephine with regard to the possibility of working as a drawing master in her school. His willingness to undertake paid employment is surprising in view of his expression of the typical opinion of it amongst his class. However, his willingness is a response to his father’s letter, which has not been accompanied by the usual cheque. Nonetheless, he intends to take his job seriously; when asked by Josephine if he will forgive her for taking

her profession seriously, he answers, 'Of course, when it is my profession' (37). His answer to her subsequent question is equally apposite: "'Do you feel you have a gift for teaching?'" .... "I feel I have a gift for drawing. And that has always been a reason for teaching it"' (37). Thanking her for engaging him, he adds reassuringly, 'I will try to do my duty' (37), before returning to his flippant mode: 'And I will write to my father tonight ... I am not at all ashamed of talking about it [his stipend]' (37).

Felix's homosexuality, his campness, his profession of drawing master (albeit brief), all these factors suggest to the reader, immediately and forcefully, a complete divergence from the concept of the patriarch. His classification as a patriarch amongst others of the landed gentry is therefore perhaps unexpected. However, Felix is the only son of a baronet, and his father regularly lets him know that he is dissatisfied with his way of life and seeks to persuade him to come home and assume his proper place in society.

Felix continues to take his job seriously. Some weeks later, during the course of an Open Day for parents, Jonathan asks him about the programme for the day: 'Is there anything more to come?' (92). Felix instantly replies, 'The exhibition of drawings ... You need not be ashamed of their quality: I entrust their mounting to no-one but myself. I should be ashamed to let a pupil take home a drawing that had no merit...' (92). Josephine's response to this is to raise her eyebrows to Miss Munday and Miss Luke (two staff members) 'in mock despair' (92); she is clearly not in any way concerned by Felix's manner. In Felix's ensuing conversation with a parent, in which he appears to speak passionately about the education of girls, he convinces the parent of his sincerity: 'He has his own touch, that drawing master of yours. He seems to take his work in a serious spirit' (92). Josephine's response, 'delivered with a smile', suggests that perhaps 'in a serious spirit' is scarcely an apt

phrase to apply to Felix, to which the parent significantly replies, 'I was speaking of his real attitude, apart from his talk' (92); clearly, the parent has either been entirely deceived by Felix or has penetrated his façade.

The question of the education of girls arises again on the same occasion, as Felix's forceful response to a parent who seems to take his daughter's education casually: 'I am shocked by people's attitude to their daughters ... They all express open surprise that their education should be taken seriously. It is a good thing that they entrust it to other people: they are evidently not without parental instincts. But they don't seem to give any real thought to their being the mothers of the race' (98). The father's rather defensive response (part of which reveals that almost as much is spent on girls' education as on boys') provokes a response from Felix nearly as pointed as his previous one: 'It is so savage of us to be proud of that. We aim at real equality, and every extra is a step towards it. So as drawing is an extra, I am sure that your daughter will take it' (99). Felix determinedly persists in his attempts to overcome the father's resistance; the situation is resolved only by a *contretemps* which develops between Josephine and Mrs. Giffard. Felix, however, must have the last word. Saying to the parent that to delay his viewing of the pupils' work 'would postpone your recognition of the inferiority of other people's children' (100-101), he concludes, 'The parents of daughters are not so unnatural in that matter as in others' (101). To the father's assumption that he knows a good deal about parents and therefore must have been in the school a long time, Felix allows his vanity to re-surface: 'Anyone would suppose that' (101).

Coming upon Josephine shortly after Gabriel's marriage and departure and finding her 'with a somehow fallen face, as if baffled of something she had looked for' (142), Felix delivers a speech which might appear surprisingly irrelevant if

readers did not realise that he has perceived the expression on Josephine's face and possibly overheard the topic of her and Miss Rosetti's conversation: Josephine has been at pains to create the impression (to Miss Rosetti) that she and Gabriel have enjoyed a special relationship; what her 'fallen face.....' inadvertently reveals is that she is distressed by Gabriel's departure. Jonathan's response demonstrates his perception of her feelings: 'I could not stay with women who have no sorrow to hide, and not enough to hide of anything else. I am ill-at-ease with people whose lives are an open book. There is so much in me, that must at all costs be hidden' (142). As if he has gone too far in revealing himself, he returns to one of his usual preoccupations, his camp insistence on the importance of the style of his clothes: 'Jonathan and I were coming to dinner, so may I stay and not go home to dress? My wedding clothes are nearly as becoming as my evening ones' (142). When Josephine replies that his clothes don't matter, he makes clear his judgement of his clothes and their importance as superior to hers: 'I noticed that you thought that about clothes; and I see that your clothes did not matter; but I don't think mine can be dismissed like that' (142). If the first part of the speech ('I could not stay ... be hidden') is sincere, it is significant. As someone whose life has appeared to be 'an open book' his admission is important; moreover, readers remember that Felix has claimed that he prefers women (in a previous conversation with his fellow-lodger, Fane). Yet he is careful not to reveal too much of his meaning, retreating into territory more familiar to his listener as an expression of his personality. Further evidence of his perspicacity follows; when Josephine comments that Ruth (the bride) looked pretty, and suggests that perhaps her clothes have contributed to this, thus confirming Felix's view as to their importance, he responds: '... I did not know that it was clothes. I was afraid it was happiness' (143). Perhaps he is starting to realise that

marriage can bring happiness, and is more important than clothes; that is why he is 'afraid', and that is what he is hiding.

When Felix hears that his father's health is failing, he goes to ask Josephine for leave to return home, and finds Gabriel with her. Gabriel's response to Felix's remark that he is 'in trouble' (169), is to ask if that is really the case. Felix's reply is delivered in his usual flippant tone, but reveals genuine feeling: 'The astonishing thing is, that I am. I thought I should have to face the absence of sorrow. And what I am facing, is just the ordinary presence of it. One thing about the sorrow is, that it is known not to be the sadder kind' (169). Gabriel reproaches him for his mood of 'complete unseemliness', to which Felix responds, 'Surely you know what may be covered by a jesting exterior. You speak as if I had not just told you what is covered by mine' (169). The awkward conversation continues: Felix will make short visits home, eliciting from Josephine the fact that on his father's death she does not want him to leave his post; Gabriel predicts that he will do so.

The mood is lightened by the entrance of Helen Keats, the newest member of staff, whom Josephine has in mind as a second wife for Gabriel. Her attempts to leave Helen and Gabriel alone together are unsuccessful in the face of Felix's desire to remain. This four-way conversation is followed by one of Compton-Burnett's hiatuses: Josephine remarks on the bond between the four of them in regard to the deaths of their parents, and the subsequent paragraph opens with 'A few hours later Felix was greeting Sir Robert Bacon' (at his home) (173). During the conversation between Felix and his father, the latter expresses a desire to get to know his son better, and asks that Felix promise to marry and carry on the place:

"My son, we may get to know each other better in my very last days".

“I am sure we shall. I know you better in the very last minute”.

“Felix, would you promise to keep a promise to a dying man?”

“Yes. I am one of the very few people who would. Now do you think you know me a little better?” (174).

Felix’s words are still light-hearted, but are nonetheless straightforward expressions of his sincerity, without any equivocation. A few moments later, he promises to marry. Readers now know the ending of the novel as far as Felix is concerned, and wait to see how he will transmit the news to Josephine and Jonathan. On his return to Jonathan’s house after the death of his father, Felix tells Jonathan of his change of plans. He and Jonathan await the arrival of their dinner guests, Josephine, Helen, Fane, and Gabriel. It is Jonathan who acquaints Josephine with the news of Sir Robert’s death and Felix’s subsequent intentions; Josephine is sympathetic, but apparently anxious as to the length of notice Felix is going to give before he leaves. Gabriel perceptively tells Felix, ‘You are already changed by your position’ (181). Felix resumes his flippant manner as he tells Gabriel, ‘I am so much changed, that I feel it odd that I should have pupils. Of course, they will feel it a come-down to be taught by a woman’. Asked why this should be the case, he answers, ‘My father told me that no man but me would do it’, and goes on to quote his father yet again: ‘I don’t know that my personal opinion about teaching drawing to girls was honest. It was just in keeping with my whimsical side. It was my father’s opinion about it that was honest’ (182).

The conversation continues, Felix voicing what readers have already noticed: ‘I am going to be more conventional now that my father is dead’ (183), to be told by the perceptive Gabriel, ‘You were never unconventional’ (184). Felix can only

agree: ‘No, never; I quite agree. I think it was wonderful, how beneath everything I really conformed’ (184). The topic of conversation turns to adaptability, about which Josephine is astute in her musings about Felix: ‘Or has he already been showing it [adaptability]? .... Has his part in the school been the most subtle exercise of it? .... The death of a man in the position of Felix’s father was bound to have its reverberations’ (185).

The first ‘reverberation’ to strike Josephine is Felix’s announcement of his approaching wedding to Helen; it is not long before the couple are visited in Felix’s ancestral home by Josephine, Jonathan, Gabriel, and Fane. Felix’s and Helen’s conversation as they wait for their guests reveals that Felix has not lost his flippant humour, and that Helen is a match for him:

“As I do not keep my least thought from you, I confess that I hope she [Josephine] will be impressed by what she sees. That is really my least thought. I have no other quite so small”.

“I have one smaller. I hope she will suffer a personal pang”.

“Must you have one as small as that?”

“Yes, I must, because of the thought you do keep from me. You can’t pretend that you did not suspect the truth” [that Josephine harbours rather questionable feelings for Felix].

“Of course I pretend that I did not suspect it....” (209).

The meeting soon passes; as Josephine and Fane leave, there is a short but revealing conversation:

“We were too homesick to be at our best, Helen”.

“Yes. Seeing Mrs Napier made us feel terribly out of it all”.

“We ought to ask the mistresses to visit us”.

“But it might bring on the first feelings. It will be braver to settle down into our new life, and remember it is all we have” (215).

There are no attributions other than 'said' (as is the case with the excerpt quoted from p.174) to assist readers in the interpretation of this exchange, yet it is significant. Readers learn that both Helen and Felix have been homesick during the visit, and that they felt 'out of it all'. Felix suggests a means of assuaging their homesickness, but Helen, wiser and more courageous than her husband, shows a greater realisation of what they face, and a greater determination to meet it.

The entertaining Felix Bacon has engaged readers throughout, by means of both his frivolous humour and his predicament: an apparent misfit in terms of his family and his class. Yet when necessary and for the most traditional of reasons, his promise to his dying father, he has transformed himself into a heterosexual and a budding squire and possible paterfamilias. The reversal of Felix's attitudes, from homosexuality to heterosexuality, from rebellion against his father to devotion to him, from lack of interest in his heritage to the assumption of responsibility for it, is startling. Perhaps Josephine has dimly perceived the truth, that Felix's work as a teacher of drawing has indeed been the final exercise of his 'adaptability'. Have the feminine attractions of Helen Keats had anything at all to do with the transformation? Or has societal pressure, more specifically that of the landed class to which he belongs, been a more significant instrument of the change? Has his homosexuality simply been a rather protracted youthful rebellion? Readers have noted the sincerity of his last conversations with his father and his assertions as to his reform: perhaps signs of a belated maturity. What seems to be of the greatest importance in influencing him is his love and loyalty to his father and his heritage: has this come about as the result of a *realisation* of what is important to him, or rather of a conscious *decision* to change his way of life? Whatever have been Felix's motivations, Compton-Burnett appears to suggest that sexuality is not innate and

fixed but rather that it may fluctuate depending on age and circumstance; thus to attempt to assign human beings to categories with clear-cut boundaries is at best simplistic. It is interesting to compare the development of Josephine Napier and Maria Rosetti, in the same novel, with that of Felix. These two professional women will be discussed in the following chapter (see Introduction, p. 27; Ch .4, f)).

Dudley Gaveston, discussed briefly above, is not a patriarch, as has been made clear. However, he lives in the family house on the family estate, and assists his brother in its management when necessary; the same attitudes and behaviours are expected of Dudley as of Edgar. Insofar as Dudley is kind, loving, generous, and responsible, he is a better man than Edgar. However, he has felt it necessary to adopt a persona: he builds on and emphasises his natural kindliness, good humour, and wit in order to perform a role which will make him irreplaceable in the Gaveston family home. He portrays himself as uninterested in material matters, content with his lot as the younger brother without position or possessions, and of rather frivolous disposition; he stresses the importance of ‘little things’ (45) and of ‘behaviour’ and ‘manners’; he is deliberately presenting his camp persona, fulfilling Sontag’s description of someone who ‘plays a role’ (*Note 10*).

If love of his brother is the motive for Dudley’s perceived need to perform a role, it is his wit, self-deprecating and ironic, which to a considerable extent serves as the vehicle for his performance. By making a virtue of his dependent status he manipulates the stereotypical figure of the ‘poor relation’ in order to establish and maintain his unassailable place in the family affections.

Immediately after breakfast at the beginning of the novel, as the family is dispersing to go about the business of the day, Dudley calls attention to himself and his lack of responsibilities with a typically *insouciant* remark: ‘I could not bear to

have regular employment' (17). A few minutes later, his tongue again firmly in his cheek, he declares, 'I have a great dislike for ways; I think few things are worse' (20). Blanche has just referred to the fact that she and her sister, who will be coming to live in the lodge, have their 'own ways with each other' (20); Dudley knows that these 'ways' are produced by the vicious Matty's jibes at Blanche.

When Justine forecasts her brother Aubrey's success with the Seatons, her mother's sister and father, Dudley does not waste a moment before directing attention away from Aubrey and towards himself: 'I shall have the same sort of triumph.... They will begin by noticing my brother and find their attention gradually drawn to me' (22). Contradicting Justine, who says he cannot always play second fiddle, Dudley speaks, 'his eyes on Edgar: "Yes, I can... It is a great art and I have mastered it"' (22). This short exchange is significant: he is openly acknowledging, to the readers and to those present, that he is playing a role. The intentionality of his choice of role is clear, as is his confidence in his performance of it: his place in the household may be secondary to that of his brother, but he has consciously decided on it, and fully realises its complexity and the necessity of continuing to fulfil it. Readers quickly become aware of his continual vigilance in maintaining and cultivating the image, an image which is as persuasive amongst the neighbours as it is within the family; ironically, his immediate family, his listeners, remain unaware of the persona.

Dudley figures in the whole Gaveston family as an object of affection and admiration: his smile lightens their days, he assists his brother in the management of the estate, and even Matty, shortly after her arrival, tells him that she has often been 'cheered'(45) by the sound of his voice . His staging of himself is again evident on this occasion; he replies, 'I am glad you have. I have always meant you to be. I am in

my element in a chat. My strong point is those little things which are more important than big ones, because they make up life' (45). It is on the 'little things', the minutiae of daily life, that Duncan has based the part he plays in the family: his ever-present good nature, his helpfulness, his wit and *insouciance*.

During a conversation about the 'interesting and stimulating' in human nature, Dudley is self-deprecating: "I suppose I spend my life on the surface.... But it does seem to avoid a great deal" (79). The open acknowledgement by Dudley that he spends his life 'on the surface' and his belief that 'the little things... make up life' (see above:45) are a clear signal to the reader of the camp nature of much of Dudley's behaviour. (See Sontag, *Notes* 2 and 38.)

Shortly afterwards Dudley makes even plainer the weight he attaches to outward 'behaviour'. Reflecting on the meeting with Maria, he admires her for behaving 'beautifully' (94). He emphasises the point: 'I do admire behaviour; I love it more than anything' (94). Dudley's declaration reinforces readers' awareness that his own behaviour is the result of careful consideration: he seeks to perform consistently the role he considers appropriate for a man in his position. Moreover, his avowal that he considers 'behaviour', in other words 'appearances', to be of paramount importance, is consonant with his previous expressions of belief as to the nature of social intercourse.

Justine's affection and concern for her uncle are evident early in the novel. Her response to his assertion that Matty and her father will soon 'find their attention' drawn to him acknowledges that '...then it will be all up with anyone else' (22). A moment later, seeing her father and Dudley walking outside, she exclaims, 'Those two tall figures! ... It is a sight of which I can never tire ...' (22). Throughout the novel she remains open in her love and admiration for her uncle; seeing him walking

in the garden with Maria Sloane, she describes him as ‘a finished and gallant person’ (144), and after the wedding of Edgar and Maria she remembers her uncle: ‘Easy, self-controlled, courteous! It was a lesson how to do the difficult thing. We have only to think of that example, if we find ourselves at a loss’ (217). When they learn that Miss Griffin, who has fled from her house on a freezing cold night, has been seen in Dudley’s company, she expresses her confidence in him: ‘We need not worry about anyone who is in Uncle’s charge ...’ (249). Her brothers too make plain their affection and regard for their uncle.

About to set off on a business trip, Dudley is in full self-promotional mode: he does not miss the opportunity of soliciting the attention of the family: ‘I am waiting to be told to take care of myself and to come back as soon as I can’ (185). He manages to achieve the same manner on his return, when Edgar tells him of his and Maria’s engagement: ‘So I am to be a hero. Well, it will suit me better than it would most people....’ (194). In this lengthy speech it becomes apparent that Dudley’s frequent remarks to the effect that having money is increasing his understanding of human nature are indeed true. He shrewdly assesses the reaction of ‘others’ to his new status: ‘I return to my life of living for others. I don’t think that they have really liked my doing anything else. And I see that it is nicer for them’ (194). It is at this point, when he learns of his fiancée’s change of heart, that the extent to which he plays a part becomes fully apparent: ‘Dudley looked at his brother with motionless eyes, and in an instant recovered himself and met the moment, seeming to himself to act a part over unrealised feeling’ (194). The acting of a part has been conscious behaviour as far as Dudley is concerned; he has been fully aware of the need to do so, and confident of his performance: ‘It is a great art and I have mastered it’ (see above: 22). Now, however, he is faced with a ‘feeling’ which he

has never before experienced, which entails an even greater imperative to assume a mask; anguish can scarcely be too strong a term for a man of Dudley's degree of self-knowledge.

For readers this is a profoundly poignant moment. They are already fully cognisant of Dudley's devotion to Edgar and his role as a helpful and jocular brother-in-law, a trusted and faithful confidant and support to Edgar and an almost paternal presence in the lives of his nephews and niece; now they are struck by his courage and the strength of his will as he controls the effects of what can only be described as a traumatic shock. That so far he has played his role so well that he is expected to rise above his pain is strongly implied by Edgar's first words to him: 'I cannot ask you to wish us happiness, but I can hardly believe, with my knowledge of you, that you will not wish it' (194).

After his recovery from the shock, Dudley, in order to bolster his courage and hide his suffering, is overt in his admiration of his own performance; he explains to Matty and Miss Griffin, 'Let me get my word in at once ... Well, the cloud fell on me, sudden and complete, and I lifted myself and went forward. I told people myself; I went through my strange task, shirking nothing, and adding my own note with what was surely the most heroic touch of all' (205). His self-glorification continues soon afterwards, as he expresses his intention to claim centre-stage at the impending wedding: 'I shall be best man... I think people will look at me more than at Edgar. I shall be a man with a story...' (214). Readers are not surprised that at the wedding Dudley behaves impeccably.

Shortly after the wedding, however, when Dudley follows his and Edgar's previous custom of going to the library after dinner, the brothers find themselves embroiled in an exchange of wounding words; Dudley is finally provoked by the

selfishness of Edgar, who accuses Dudley of giving him nothing throughout their lives, ending: ‘And now I have lost my brother...’ (231). Dudley responds, ‘You have lost your brother! Then know that you have lost him... I have always been alone in your house, always in my heart.... You had nothing to give...’ (231). The speech takes up ten lines, with several repetitions: *lost* twice, *know* twice, *glad* three times, *always* twice, *nothing* three times, *not care(d)* four times. The speech is followed by a fourteen -line narrative paragraph which reveals Maria’s sensitivity and understanding. The short paragraph which precedes Dudley’s speech and that which follows the one referring to Maria powerfully express Dudley’s turmoil:

Edgar turned his face aside, and the simple movement, which Dudley knew was not acting, pierced him beyond his bearing and flung him forward. His pain and his brother’s, the reproach which he suffered in innocence and sacrifice, flooded his mind and blurred its thought. (231)

The vocabulary of the first two clauses of the first sentence is value-free, but is immediately followed by *pierced* and *flung*, two violent verbs; the noun *pain* follows as the result of the two verbs and at the same time bridges the mood created by them and that generated by the equally strongly emotive *reproach*, *innocence*, *sacrifice*. The final two verbs, *flooded* and *blurred*, evoke the enormity of Dudley’s confusion of thought and emotion. The first two clauses are neutral in impact; the remainder of the paragraph, in very few words, succeeds in tracing Dudley’s path to the point at which he loses his self-control. Readers almost expect what happens at the beginning of the paragraph following that which describes Maria’s reaction: ‘Dudley went alone from his brother’s house, taking nothing with him but his purse and covering from the winter cold. He went, consciously empty of hand and of heart,

almost triumphant in owning so little in the house that had been his home' (232). It is narrated simply and with pathos.

Readers' attention remains focused on Dudley as he goes 'further from his brother' (236). From this point until the end of the novel Dudley's emotional fragility is as evident as his physical: in the adverse weather conditions which prevail during the night, Dudley helps the desperate Miss Griffin, but has little thought for his own plight and continues to wander until forced to take shelter in a farmhouse ('twenty miles away' but unnamed (260)). He has contracted a severe chill, however, which deteriorates into pneumonia. The Gavestons are notified and rush to his bedside; even as Matty finishes her message: 'Edgar had already gone ...' (261). At the farmhouse Miss Griffin is found to be nursing Dudley, and as the family enters, it is of her that Dudley is thinking: 'He tried to raise himself and spoke almost with a scream. "If I die, Miss Griffin must have some money! You will give her some? You won't keep it all?"' (264). Reassured, he looks at Edgar 'with a sort of appraisal. "You don't like me to be ill", he said, in a shrewd, almost knowing tone. "Then you should not make me ill. It is your fault"' (264-265). Edgar acknowledges the truth of the accusation; sadly, Dudley is scarcely conscious.

Before Dudley starts to recover he 'sank to the point of death, and just did not pass it' (265). His recovery was at first slow but became more rapid with increasing strength, and even before he was taken home the narrator is once again significant: 'In himself he seemed suddenly to be a whole man. The threat of death, with its lesson of what he had to lose, had shown him that life as he had lived it was enough. He asked no more than he had, chose to have only this. His own personality, free of the strain and effort of the last months, was as full and natural as it had been in his youth' (266).

Once back home Dudley's camp staging of himself is again noticeable in his flippant remarks as he calls attention to his delicate condition and his narrow escape from death: 'I should not like Aubrey to die ... I only nearly died, and it would give him the immediate advantage' (282).

As the rest of the household leave the brothers alone together, Edgar starts to reflect on 'the last fourteen months' (285). Dudley sums up the train of events, his wry sense of humour well to the fore: 'I decided to provide for her [Miss Griffin] for life. ... It seemed the only thing in view of the climate. ... Oh and Clement was gradually becoming a miser all the time' (285). Yet they have not quite returned to their former easy relationship: some home truths must be exchanged before Dudley can forget all that he has gone through. He tells Edgar that he has been a failure as a father before reassuring him that he, Dudley, has quite recovered from his feelings for Maria, telling him that he has proposed to someone else: "'What?'" said Edgar, the fear in his tone bringing final content to his brother' (286). Dudley continues with a typically flippant utterance: 'Women do not seem to want me as the companion of their lives' (286). When Edgar expresses incredulity at the thought of Miss Griffin as Dudley's bride, the latter is quick to point out once again that his brother lacks the ability to express his love: '... But you should have said: "I want you, Dudley"' (286). Again, Edgar does not respond, provoking another reminder from Dudley: '... I have had to say it for you. Saying it in your own way does not count. I said it in anyone's way. I am the better of the two' (287). Edgar continues to fail his brother, who has to content himself with remembering his brother's tone of voice, expressed in the first quotation from p. 286, above, ("What?" said Edgar, the fear in his tone bringing final content to his brother'), and his realisation quoted on p.266, above, ('In himself he seemed suddenly to be a whole man. The threat of

death, with its lesson of what he had to lose, had shown him that life as he had lived it was enough. He asked no more than he had, chose to have only this. His own personality, free of the strain and effort of the last months, was as full and natural as it had been in his youth').

Dudley is a good man; there are not many of Compton-Burnett's characters about whom such an unequivocal statement of virtue can be made. He has shown himself to be kind and affectionate, compensating for his brother's shortcomings in regard to the latter's wife and children; he has recovered from the betrayal by Edgar and Maria and forgiven them; he has shown compassion for the abused Miss Griffin; he has been generous with his inheritance and, moreover, has revealed a social conscience. The camp persona he has cultivated and enhanced – of wit, frivolity, of emphasis on his façade – has aided him in his self-portrayal to the family of their beloved and indispensable uncle. The effort it has cost him has been revealed by his anguish prior to and during his breakdown. If Felix Bacon's perceived campness is a disguise for the role he is playing, Dudley's is a defence he has erected round his sensitivity.

A noteworthy choric voice is that of Julian Wake (*Brothers and Sisters*) who is discussed further in *Gender Issues: Men*. He and his sister Sarah are members of the social group consisting of the family who live in the Big House (Sophia and Christian Stace and their three children), the rector and his sister, the doctor and his two children, and the Lang siblings (newcomers to the village). It is fair to say that Julian makes sure that his friends are acquainted with everything of importance that happens in the village; it is he who informs his friends of the arrival of the newcomers, the Langs, who have come to live at the Black House, and whose presence plays a significant part in the novel.

Julian Wake (*Brothers and Sisters*) does not possess an estate; he is unmarried and homosexual. However, he is a close friend of the younger Staces, and this fact alone indicates that he is a member of their class; he may almost be said to be a squire without portfolio. The Reverend Edward Dryden, asked by his sister whether he likes Julian, immediately identifies the two most salient aspects of Julian's character: "“Oh – well, Julian is the sort of man who is always thinking of the effect of what he says. But he is not a bad fellow. He is really a good-hearted man”" (60). Dryden is accurate in his assessment: throughout the course of the novel readers are presented with ample evidence of both Julian's kind heart and his compulsion to please.

The paragraph which introduces Julian and his sister informs readers of significant details: they learn that the Wakes are not yet thirty, have 'colourless hair and faces' (49), with mobile features; the last two details might be said to imply an ability to be 'all things to all men', which Julian, as we learn, strives to be. The narrative voice continues: 'They shared a cottage in the village street, and a flat in London, and were reputed to be very devoted and very well off, and enjoyed even more prosperity and mutual affection than was said' (49). Readers note the suggestion of incest and also the fact that they are of private means.

As Edward has intimated, Julian's self-presentation is constant; he says early in the novel, 'I owe it to my guests to show them my best side' (105). Such remarks are frequent. His voice is first heard in an open and deliberate staging of himself: 'You might have known we should not miss a party. We have been hurrying along, very upset because we were giving a wrong impression of ourselves; of our manners, which is a serious thing. Sarah was worried as well because of her shoes. And I was unselfishly disturbed about the pony. I did not give a thought to my shoes. I am so

distraught when dumb animals suffer' (49). Sophia, his hostess, interjects a brief response, but Julian is in full flow: 'Mrs. Stace and I understand what a credit it is to animals to be dumb ... It is not everyone who could appreciate that. And now we go into dinner after all the rest, as if we could afford to do it. It is so satisfying not to have to wait, and know other people have done it. But then they are not dumb. I am afraid they were not' (50). Julian's words could not be more clearly illustrative: he is anxious to be perceived as well-mannered and kind to animals, even placing them above shoes in importance. In the rest of the novel he demonstrates that though items of clothing may be outranked by animals on his list of priorities, he is far from considering social niceties as at all trivial; indeed, his expressed emphasis on the seriousness of manners supports his camp self-presentation. At the same time he reveals his understanding of his fellow-guests by his implicit acknowledgement that they have almost certainly been talking about his and Sarah's lateness.

He goes on to recount in some detail the arrival of a new family in the village, revealing for the first time what will emerge as another important aspect of his personality, his love of gossip. Still attentive to his self-projection as socially polished, he acknowledges that he (along with Peter Bateman, a 'poor relation' of the Staces, who has a son, Latimer, and a daughter, Tilly) is 'monopolising the talk' (52), and asserts that he is 'going to be silent' until he is 'pressed to speak' (53). His self-deprecating irony is apparent a moment later, as readers encounter for the first time his foregrounding of his and Sarah's shortcomings as a means of deflecting the possibly adverse opinions of others: 'How nice for Caroline and Gilbert to be good-looking! Both of them too! Sarah and I try to remember that personality is everything. Our old nurse says it is a mercy we are both tall, and even our mother said it was a great thing' (53). Once the members of the younger generation are left

alone, Julian is happy to seize the opportunity offered by Dinah, who worries that everyone they usually talk about is here in the room: ‘Sarah and I will offer ourselves ...’ (55). He proceeds to voice the criticisms that he knows are made of them both – and of himself in particular – thus forestalling their repetition and inviting contradiction, another attempt to disarm those present.

On their return from Andrew’s party, the narrative voice offers another stereotypical suggestion as to Julian’s sexuality: he looks around his sitting room ‘with its carefully cottage-like furnishing, that he had himself carried out under his sister’s silence and smiling eye’ (57). On a later occasion, Edward admires the flowers in the Wakes’ sitting room, clearly assuming that Sarah is responsible for them, only to be told that Julian has grown them, cut them, and arranged them in the vase; moreover, Julian tells him: ‘Every little womanly touch in this cottage is mine’ (109). Later in the novel, at the Langs’ house, he lets Gilbert go outside on his own, preferring to stay indoors with the women, who are going to criticise Judith: ‘... even if women are more inclined than men to criticise their own sex, I cannot agree to it. I have taken too much pains with that side of my nature – I mean that aspect of it’ (174). It is noteworthy that Julian, like Felix Bacon, the art teacher in *More Women than Men*, conforms to the stereotypical depiction of the male homosexual: they cultivate the feminine side of their nature.

Talking to Sarah about their coming encounter with the Langs, their new neighbours at the Black Lodge, Julian expresses his intention of impressing them: ‘I think we might smile at them, being in the country and near neighbours. I think they would remember my first smile’ (71). A tongue-in-cheek sentence from the narrative voice reinforces readers’ appreciation of Julian’s demeanour: ‘The guests, fresh from

this sight, which Julian was right was remembered, were shown to their new friends' study' (71).

Much later in the novel, the details of the Langs' relationship to the Staces and thus the incestuous marriage of Christian Stace and his wife Sophia emerge; the Stace siblings must of necessity break off their engagements to the Lang siblings. Their subsequent engagements to Edgar Dryden and his sister also come to an end as the Staces recognise their fiancés' inhumanity. In the resulting turmoil Julian approaches Dinah Stace; her response to his proposal reveals not only her complete understanding of Julian but also her own state of mind: 'Julian, I know you have wanted to marry me almost as much as you have not wanted to; and it is kind of you to want to choose it now, with things as they are, and you yourself as you are. And I like you to be as you are; and I need kindness now. But it would spoil you to be joined with this. It is not your kind of thing' (253). Julian responds in his usual humorous tone, eliciting this from Dinah: 'You are always at your best, jesting, ... and you have been today' (253). When Andrew comes in, Julian immediately tells him that Dinah has rejected him, and informs him that he and Sarah have not been discussing the Staces, but that they are certainly going to now. To Andrew's wry protestation that they already certainly have been doing so, Julian insists that this not the case, listing those things which he claims are not the same as 'discussing you': 'We have only been talking about your family, and about its being rather condensed a little way back; and how much money there will be after the death duties, and in what proportion it goes to the three of you; and whether you are more upset or relieved by your mother's death; and whether it would be best for you to move right away from it all. But that is not discussing you' (253). The brother and sister, knowing Julian as they do, remain good-natured in the face of the evidence of his

insatiable gossip-mongering, and by his outspoken humorousness Julian again disarms his interlocutors, not only recovering the potentially awkward situation but also succeeding in eliciting more information from Andrew, in particular that he and Dinah are going to live in London. During the ensuing conversation, Julian maintains his teasing tone, and skilfully succeeds in turning the tables on Andrew. His mention of a party causes Andrew to ask if he (Julian) and Sarah are giving it; Julian, in mock horror, immediately replies, ‘Andrew, ..., you would not think of giving a party, with your mother just taken, would you?’ (255). When Dinah wonders if he decided to give the party on finding out about their leaving, he is again able to use his quick wit, this time combining gentle criticism of Dinah with self-mockery: ‘No, Dinah. You are egotistic, .... ... Since I planned that Sarah and I would go too, some moments later’ (255).

Interesting insights into Julian’s character are provided by the three Staces; Andrew expresses pleasure that they will have the Wakes with them in London, and Robin asks whether Julian made a ‘jest’ of proposing marriage to Dinah, to which she replies, ‘Yes. He gives us heart by his own tried methods.’ She adds a further expression of faith in Julian’s true friendship: ‘No one would bring our story less than he and Sarah’ (256).

After this visit, the Wakes go straight to the Langs’ house, where Julian comes immediately to the point: ‘Caroline, I have come in without knocking, to show the last intimacy...’. He embarks on his proposal to Caroline in the same defensively flippant manner that has marked his preceding conversation with the Staces: ‘and to be equal to Gilbert, who has begun stepping into the parlour [of the Wake house] in that manner. You and I will be very lonely, if Sarah goes on permitting this in him. And you cannot marry Andrew, because you are his aunt. I am saying this to bring

things home to you, and to show you my worst meanness, which is fair. And I cannot marry Dinah, because she has refused me. I am telling you, for you to know all my history. That is the whole of it. I will not keep even the worst from you. I know I am no better than a woman, and how dreadful it will be to you. And I will not even tell you, that I proposed to Dinah because everything was due to her at this time, and so I did it, though I knew it would be of no good; because a true man would always avoid such an admission' (257). The speech reveals a great deal beneath the flippancy: his understanding of the situation of both the Langs and of himself and his sister, his essential honesty, including a covert admission of his homosexuality and an acknowledgement of the difficulty this will cause his wife, and his sensitivity with regard to Dinah.

The suggestion of incest has already been noted. However, at the end of the novel, when Julian is reflecting on his relationship with his sister once they are both married, he reveals what has been, and continues to be, the essence of their relationship for him: '... still, we shall always get away together, and talk in our old way?' (268). Sarah, to her brother's satisfaction, drily demonstrates her understanding of him, to which he responds: 'We understand each other. How seldom that can be said of two human beings! If in the future I don't dare to say it, remember that I have said it' (268). One of the inferences that may be drawn here is that Caroline (Julian's future wife) may not react kindly to a close relationship between her husband and his sister. Worthy of note also is the fact that Julian is clearly aware of the fact that he may well have to modify his behaviour when married. Edward's description of Julian as a goodhearted man but as one who is always considering his effect on others has been borne out throughout the novel, and his character has been further and fully revealed. The esteem and affection in which

he is held by his social circle is clear; Dinah adds a post-script. Asked how she felt 'when the news fell' (268), she replies, '... as if I had always known it, what is involved in it. That Julian was anxious to settle down. He should not care about it, not Julian. I see he feels he should not, and that shows how he really does' (268). Thus Julian's vulnerability is recognised, and his acceptance and appreciation by his friends, despite all his eccentricities, is reinforced.

That Julian is camp is undeniable: he is open in his insistence on staging himself, intent at all times on playing the role of 'Julian', constantly inviting those present to observe and witness his words and behaviour; he emphasises the importance of 'manners', Dudley Gaveston's 'little things'—the observance of social etiquette—which to him are 'a serious thing' (49). His speech and behaviour are exaggerated and extravagant, causing Rosalind Miles to describe him as 'the outrageous Julian' (Miles, 178); mentions of the feminine side of his nature remind readers of Sontag's statement that 'Camp is the triumph of the epicene style' (*Note* 11). Julian's whole demeanour is 'playful'; his intention, and the effect he has, is 'to dethrone the serious' (Sontag, *Note* 41). Both his friends and Compton-Burnett's readers enter with him 'a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation'; they do not judge him (Sontag, *Note* 55); they have for him 'a tender feeling' (Sontag, *Note* 56).

All of this, together with his intense involvement in gossip, combines to represent a character which appears to embody the notion of 'style' at the expense of 'content'. Yet although Julian is witty and extravagant, and provokes laughter and tenderness in both friends and readers, they are all aware of his sensitivity and his vulnerability (see p. 268 below).

Julian is a man of considerable moral and emotional substance. His loyalty and devotion to his sister and their friends are genuine, and his sensitive awareness of

the predicament of Tilly and Latimer Bateman manifest themselves despite the occasional barbed comment. His shrewd appraisal of the situation of the Staces and his insights into their emotional turmoil as well as that of minor characters such as Tilly and Latimer demonstrate considerable intelligence. The recognition by Edward of his good-heartedness and the affection and respect of his friends confirm readers' interpretation of him as an essentially sympathetic character. The irony of the fact that such a man cultivates so determinedly such immoderate speech and demeanour is not lost on readers: they are bound to infer from his behaviour an intense need for self-protection.

Despite certain similarities to Dudley Gaveston, Julian Wake's difference is distinct. In Dudley there is no indication of homosexuality, whilst in Julian's case evidence of his sexuality is clear and repeated, both to readers and to his friends and relatives; readers therefore see a closer resemblance to Felix Bacon, the drawing master in *More Women than Men*, than to Dudley. It is noteworthy that Felix also feels the need to marry; both he and Julian appear to accept the necessity. For Julian, whose forebears may be presumed to have been landed and lost their land, societal pressure in general appears to have persuaded him that the married state is an appropriate one. The expectations of his class, manifest in the supreme importance he places on 'manners' and his need to be embedded in his circle even to the extent of following the Staces to London, perhaps have added to the pressure. Even the possibility of becoming a paterfamilias is open to this 'gentleman of private means'. Readers conclude that Julian's continual striving to place himself at the heart of his social circle and to remain there may well be motivated by his fear of possible censure and ostracism, and by a desire, recognised or unrecognised, to father a family.

It is not surprising that the high ideal of Victorian patriarchy, explicated at the beginning of this chapter, should prove difficult to achieve. Faced with national and international problems, the imperfect patriarchs in these novels appear to pull up the drawbridge behind them as they concentrate on the 'fame of their house'. That is the source of Duncan Edgeworth's conceit, and of his abuse of power; in the case of John Ponsonby, who is already faced with the necessity to work to support his family, it is his professional pride which he feels is threatened by his daughter's success, and his selfishness which causes him to hand over the welfare of his children and ignore the needs of his sister. Sir Godfrey Haslam, who has no inkling of the needs and aspirations of his wife 'of older blood', has worked hard to achieve his 'dream' and has done so, whereupon he is happy to throw away what he has worked so hard to acquire. Edgar Gaveston, dutiful but limited, merely affectionate towards, but distant from his wife and children, loving his brother deeply but unable to reciprocate Dudley's greater devotion, needs the latter's complementary gifts to function in all the roles of his life. How much of their inadequacy and inaction is dictated by the unconscious fear of their future, and how much do their inadequacy and inaction contribute to it?

Dudley Gaveston, a patriarch *manqué*, has been deprived by accident of birth of the opportunity of fulfilling the role which he simply assists his brother in fulfilling; Felix Bacon, a potential paterfamilias, will, if indeed he fathers children, bring his eccentricity with him into his new role, which therefore will not function according to the tradition. The Stace family, together with Julian, simply abandon 'the country', preferring 'the town'. The divergence from the ideal in the case of all of them results in a complete subversion of the notion of patriarchy. Compton-Burnett's patriarchs do not realise that their position cannot hold; in reality, the

farsighted amongst their fellows may have done so. To-day's readers, and surely some of Compton-Burnett's contemporary readers, 'watched a drama unfold, already knowing its destined outcome' (14); this is Colebrook's definition of tragic irony.

#### **Chapter 4 Gender Issues: Women** (*see Introduction, p.10*)

##### **a) The position of women**

A great deal can be inferred about the position of women from the discussions in Ch. 2 b) and Ch.3 a)

In a society dominated by the judæo-christian ideology, based on a patriarchal model, the ideal of the sanctity of marriage and the family was central. Coventry Patmore's poem, *The Angel in the House*, discussed in the previous chapter, describes the ideal woman: to be a wife and mother, to lead a life of obedience to her husband and devotion to her children, involving self-sacrifice if necessary, was perceived as the means of achieving happiness and fulfilment. An excerpt from the poem expresses the ideal wife's qualities:

1 Man must be pleased; but him to please

2 Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf

3 Of his condoled necessities

4 She casts her best, she flings herself.

....

5 And if he once, by shame oppress'd,

6 A comfortable word confers,

7 She leans and weeps against his breast,

8 And seems to think the sin was hers;

...

9 She loves with love that cannot tire;

10 And when, ah woe, she loves alone,

11 Through passionate duty love springs higher,

12 As grass grows taller round a stone.

The imperative is clearly stated and repeated: man must be pleased, and his wishes are labelled necessities (lines 1,3). His wife, nothing more than an instrument of her husband's pleasure (l.2) and herself without any needs, is in full sympathy with his, however regrettable they may be (implied by 'condoled') (lines 2,3). Patmore's use of the value-laden noun 'gulf' to indicate the extent and the nature of man's necessities, the suggestion of 'casts' - a deliberate willingness to commit oneself to a course of action whose outcome is uncertain - the violence implicit in the verb 'fling' (ll.2,4), all illustrate the intensity of Patmore's conception of the ideal wife as embodied in Emily. The 'angel' takes care to maintain the demeanour of submission implicit in 'leans', 'weeps', and 'on his breast' (l.7). Tellingly, she 'seems' (l.8) to believe the fault lies with her: she must not appear to threaten the façade of his superiority. The vision of the grieving and ever-devoted widow (the grass is growing taller (l.12)) allows Patmore to use another value-laden verb, 'springs' (l.11), with its implication of lightness and joy; his wife's now even greater love enables her to fulfil a 'duty', qualified by the adjective 'passionate' (l.11), with

its dual connotation of intensity and suffering. There is no mention of motherhood in the above extract: it must be assumed, however, that man's 'necessities' include care of, and devotion to, his children.

In *Daughters and Sons* an interesting discussion of the concept of self-sacrifice takes place. After John Ponsonby has discovered that his daughter France has had a novel published, he makes it clear that nonetheless he is still the breadwinner, and that therefore his work must take precedence over France's. For her part, France appears willing to accept his dictum, whereupon her brother Chilton asks, 'Are you of the stuff that martyrs are made of? ... I hope not; it is useless stuff' (115). The discussion is taken up later, when John has married the shrewd and sensible Edith Hallam, and Victor has realised that 'It is Aunt Hetta who will not profit by the change' (142). The conversation continues,

"My son, I should have fared but sadly without my sister. In my dark hour I had no one else. If I do not requite her sacrifice, it will be because I cannot".

"Sacrifice does recoil on people", said Edith, "and most of all on those who make it. In our resentment of it we should remember that".

"People say someone regrets a sacrifice, as if it were against her", said France. "As if she could do anything else, when she comes to consider! People repenting at leisure are not at their best".

"Ah, the words her and she!" said John. "Sacrifice has been the woman's

privilege”.

“There, the word privilege!” said Edith. “That is what we want of people, that sacrifice should be for their own good and not for other people’s, when it is simply the other way round”.

“Aunt Hetta has not made so much sacrifice”, said Clare. “She has not had so much to give up. She has behaved naturally, not nobly”.

“And we grow to the life we lead”, said John. “We are moulded to it and by it. It becomes our own”.

“What is all the talk?” said Hetta, with her eyes going straight to her brother.

“We were talking about sacrifice”, said Victor. “I don’t know how we got on to it”.

“I do not know either. It is not a thing that has ever come your way. It must be quite an academic subject. What conclusions have you reached?”

“That it is a bad thing for the person who makes it, and tends to be regretted”.

“It may be a bad thing for her, but it is not regretted, I hope. It must bring its own inner satisfaction”.

“It is very inner”, said Clare. “Self-sacrificing people do not incline to spirits”.

“You have met very few people, hardly enough to generalise”.

“Very few, and perhaps a self-sacrificing person has not been included among them”.

“You would not recognise one, if you saw her”.

“So the satisfaction is as inner as all that” (142-143).

At the beginning of this conversation John acknowledges Hetta’s sacrifice, and accepts it as his right. His second comment continues to demonstrate his conviction, typical of his time and class, that woman’s role is to sacrifice herself to man and that she is fortunate in having to do so. His third utterance shows him still not questioning his sister’s sacrifice: she has become accustomed to it and therefore accepts it as her function in life. (It is not for some time that John realises his sister’s precarious mental balance and unreasonable behaviour.) In apparent rebuttal of John’s sentiment, but with subtle wording, his new wife reminds the ‘children’ that they must be careful not to resent the sacrifice Hetta has undoubtedly made. The intelligent and perceptive France reveals her understanding of human nature (that people are bound to regret self-sacrifice), provoking John’s second utterance, which, as we have seen, is at odds with France’s remark. Edith again interjects, this time aiming her comment more directly at John by picking up his word ‘privilege’, and intimating that rather than expecting the recipient of a sacrifice to be grateful, we prefer to expect the author of the sacrifice to derive benefit from his/her act. The embittered Clare is the first to mention Hetta’s name, provoking her father to express

his still impenetrable self-satisfaction, at which point Hetta enters the room and addresses her brother alone, asking what they are talking about. Victor rather disingenuously tells her that he doesn't know how they 'got on to' the subject of sacrifice. Hetta's utterances are delivered in her usual combative tone as she seeks to remind the children of their subordinate place in the household. That she believes herself to be not only the subject of the debate but also the perpetrator of sacrifice is demonstrated by her use (twice) of the feminine pronoun 'her'.

If women's *raison d'être* was perceived as marriage and family and thus their lives were largely confined to the home, in which self-sacrifice was expected if necessary, it is not surprising that single women occupied a lower status than their married sisters and that self-sacrifice was perhaps perceived as the only road to salvation. Unmarried women were considered incomplete women: they did not serve their god-given purpose, fulfilment in marriage and child-rearing – in short, they were what Rosamund Burtenshaw labels 'superfluous spinsters' (*A House and its Head* 86). In a stratum of society in which it was considered demeaning even for men to work for a living, some single women were fortunate enough to be comfortably supported by their families or to have incomes of their own, whilst others were forced – or were courageous enough – to take up whatever work was available to them and was considered respectable: writing, teaching in one form or another, or even perhaps becoming a nursemaid or a paid companion. Since higher education was almost unheard of for women, entry to the civil service and the professions was not possible in mid-century, and it was only very slowly that education for girls became widespread later in the century. Many more, with barely adequate means, struggled to maintain their 'respectability' by not taking paid employment. Such women joined the numbers of their financially secure sisters in

seeking a meaning for their unfulfilled lives, often to be found in a focus on the church, around which these ‘spinsters of this parish’<sup>1</sup> engaged in charitable work and parish duties. In addition to the satisfaction they might gain from their good works, there was the attraction of the congregation as a surrogate family, and even the possibility of a marriage partner. Clearly, the added attraction of an unmarried clergyman was powerful. Unmarried working women such as writers, companions and governesses/teachers were assumed to be either the daughters of the landed classes who had ‘fallen on hard times’ or simply eccentric; their sisters the spinsters who did not need to earn their livelihood and who busied themselves with parish activities, often the butt of pity and derision, were at least fortunate in being in less straitened financial circumstances.

Against a background of shifting patters of population and labour, the 1851 census was the first to include a question about the marital status of women. The numbers of unmarried women were revealed as considerable, and generated a discussion around the issue of these ‘surplus’ women. It is interesting to speculate on the choice of vocabulary: ‘surplus’ to what? It was realised (by the enumerators and their masters the politicians – all men) that there were more women than men: there would be women who could not find a husband and who therefore could not have children. Since the purpose of a woman’s life was precisely that, then clearly, if she did not marry and have children, she was surplus to (men’s), and therefore to the nation’s, requirements. Moreover, unskilled in terms of domestic service and factory or agricultural work, she was unable both to contribute to the national economy and to have access to the means of her own survival. It is hardly surprising that these

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<sup>1</sup> **Banns** or **bans pl. n. 1.** the public declaration of an intended marriage, usually formally announced on three successive Sundays in the parish churches of both the betrothed. (*Collins English Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition updated (HarperCollins, Glasgow, 1994)).

‘unnecessary’ women, and the potential predicament they caused, should be represented in the literature of the day.

The term engendered a revision of the feminine stereotype and encouraged women to rebel against their subordinate role, resulting in such developments as the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 (Calder 215). Indeed, by the 1880s ‘it was being openly suggested that motherhood need not be the only or even the most desirable route to female fulfilment’; it was even the case that ‘by the end of the century men and women were writing novels that were deliberate attempts to take women away from the marriage and family theme’ (Calder, 14).

The concept of the New Woman, or First Wave Feminism, also came into being during the latter part of the nineteenth century, initially in the United States. Women fought for access to Higher Education and the professions, and for control over their own personal, social, and economic lives, pushing against the boundaries of male-dominated society. However, although divorce had become possible for women in 1857, it was still not only legally difficult but was also considered severely damaging to a woman’s reputation (Calder 120).

Previous concepts of the feminine ideal had not been overthrown: women were still largely envisaged ‘as having a sphere separate and ultimately physically subordinate to that of men despite acceptance of greater feminine capacity’ (Rowbotham, 38). Nor had the idea of ‘the Angel in the House’ been swept aside. Her domain being the emotional, it went without saying that her greatest happiness and fulfilment lay in a happy marriage and child-bearing and rearing and that only she could successfully manage a household. In nurturing her children she would be ensuring the future stability not only of her family, with its hierarchy of mothers and

sisters standing supportively behind their menfolk, but also of the wider social structure and thus of the country as a whole.

### **b) The Novels**

In the seven novels selected for study here, Compton-Burnett provides a wide-ranging and well-drawn gallery of women characters, only some of whom can be examined in detail due to considerations of space. In *A Family and a Fortune*, readers find Blanche Gaveston, who strives to be an ‘angel in the house’, Justine her daughter, a ‘do-gooder’, the embittered Matty Seton, and Miss Griffin, her downtrodden companion. *Daughters and Sons* features Charity Marcon, a successful and eccentrically camp writer of biographies, France Ponsonby, another writer, this time of novels, and her bitterly frustrated sister Maria. A succession of governesses, one of whom, Edith Haslam, is eminently sensible and marries the patriarch, make their appearance; one of the other two governesses, Miss Bunyan, exemplifies the unhappy situation of her kind. In *Brothers and Sisters* we meet several spinsters, all of whom, as is implied by the title, live with their brothers and one of whom, Dinah, remains unmarried and ‘wedded’ to her brother at the end. *More Women Than Men* offers a school staff-room full of unmarried women, the most independent of whom, Helen Keats, marries a baronet. Since not all such women are able - or willing - to find themselves a husband or a post as teacher, governess, companion, or writer, they continue to be a drain on family resources. It is noteworthy that one of the most sensible of these women (Nance Edgeworth) appears to have found a husband with whom she is in love and who she believes will respect her, perhaps an ironic suggestion to the traditional paternal figure that it is possible for a man to live happily with an equally intelligent woman, a notion of marriage itself subversive of the traditional ideal. Several more (including Cassie Jekyll, Maria Sloane, and Helen

Keats, and three of the ‘sisters’ from *Brothers and Sisters*), appear simply to accept that it is preferable to be married than single. Three prefer to remain unmarried in order to pursue their writing (France Ponsonby, Mellicent Hardisty, Charity Marcon). There is an ironic implication in this last choice: women are quite capable not only of managing their own lives but also of having a successful career. A further ironic suggestion is that for women writers in particular the single state is preferable: the situation of these women presents an ironic challenge to the very notion of womanhood prevalent at that time.

**c) Angels in the House** (*see Introduction, p. 39*)

Virginia Woolf was moved to declare, in a speech delivered before a branch of the National Society for Women’s Service on January 21<sup>st</sup>, 1931 (and later published in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*), ‘Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer’; killing the Angel in the House is precisely what Compton-Burnett does, and on more than one occasion. Three of the seven novels under discussion (*Men and Wives, A House and its Head, A Family and a Fortune*) feature women who exemplify the ideals of womanhood prevalent during the Victorian era. In the case of Harriet Haslam (*Men and Wives*), readers are informed directly of her faith: ‘an intense religious [and family life] bore heavily on her feebleness’ (7); with Ellen Edgeworth (*A House and its Head*) and Blanche Gaveston (*A Family and a Fortune*), however, readers must infer their attitudes and beliefs. The devotion of all three to husband and family and their efforts in the fulfilment of what they perceive as their duty soon become clear. All three are portrayed as suffering from a considerable degree of exhaustion and stress (*A House and its Head* 5), and Blanche appearing to suffer from an unspecified physical weakness (*A Family and a Fortune* 39), while Harriet’s precarious emotional balance

is apparent very early in the novel: ‘She had worn early in nerves and brain ...’ (*Men and Wives* 7)

None of these three women finds happiness or empathy in her marriage. Ellen’s husband Duncan is a callous bully. His failure to respect his wife and her anxious subservience to him are immediately and amply established in the first few pages of *A House and its Head*; it is Christmas morning: her first five utterances go unacknowledged, the narrative voice making clear Duncan’s ‘response’, and his rejoinders to the next few are at best unpleasant:

“So the children are not down yet?” said Ellen Edgeworth.

Her husband gave her a glance, and turned his eyes towards the window.

“So the children are not down yet?” she said on a note of question.

Mr Edgeworth put his finger down his collar, and settled his neck.

“So you are down first, Duncan?” said his wife, as though putting her observation in a more acceptable form.

Duncan returned his hand to his collar with a frown.

.....

“So you are down first of all, Duncan”, said Ellen, employing a note of propitiation, as if it would serve its purpose.

Her husband implied by lifting his shoulders that he could hardly deny it.

“The children are late, are they not?” said Ellen, to whom speech clearly ranked above silence’.

(Note the implications of the extended attributions and the subtle distinctions between them.)

Again Duncan simply shrugs, causing Ellen to exclaim: ‘I think there are more presents than usual. Oh, I wish they would all come down’ (5). Only then does Duncan deign to reply, asking her the reason for her wish. The next few minutes are as stressful for Ellen as the previous few have been, as she elicits obstructive remarks from Duncan. Finally, when his wife has been driven to offer as a reason for their lateness the fact that the mornings are getting dark, Duncan at last gives way to a fuller expression of his hectoring manner: ‘The mornings are getting dark! The mornings are getting dark! Do you mean they are so sunk in lethargy and self-indulgence, that they need a strong light to force them to raise their heads from their pillows? Is that what you mean?’ (6).

Thus a strong flavour of their relationship is created; it does not take readers long to realise the extent of the effort Ellen expends in her attempts to fulfil the demands imposed on her by the prevailing patriarchal culture as represented by her husband. Readers are fully aware of the extent to which Ellen (*A House and its Head*) is emotionally and physically drained by her constant battle to mitigate Duncan’s callousness and cruelty. They note the signs of increasing debility: whilst Christmas presents are still being exchanged, Ellen asks her husband what is to be done about presents for the servants ‘with the open sigh which was her common sign of weariness’ (12); shortly afterwards she puts ‘her hands over her eyes’ (14) and speaks ‘almost with indifference’ (15). After the morning service she is seen to look ‘pale and tired’ (20), and later in the day she ‘put her hands to her face, and gave a yawn of utter weariness’ (34).

The following morning she is visibly struggling to follow her routine and starts to weep. It is not long before she succumbs to her exhaustion and falls ill:

‘I can’t help what Father says: I must stay at home today. People must sometimes be ill. I have been ill less often than I ought in my life, because Father hates illness. I must sometimes be like other people. This house has to be so different from other houses; and lately I have felt it is too much for me, all this difference’ (47).’ Poignantly, it is only when she succumbs that her family realises the full extent of her weakness (51). Dr. Smollett sums up to Grant the stress and pain in which Ellen has been living for too long: ‘A deep mischief has gone on for a long time. It seems to do its work at the end. It is months since I spoke to your uncle of her looks. There is little more for it to do’ (50).

In her dying words Ellen emphasises her awareness of the benefits that the two ‘outsiders’, their nephew Grant and Cassie Jekyll the governess-companion, have brought to the family; their presence has at least lightened the prevailing darkness of Duncan’s household: ‘I don’t know what I should do without Cassie. She and Grant make things so much better for us, don’t they?’ (53). It is ironic that such a traditional model of the Victorian family requires two ‘outsiders’ to bring happiness.

Ellen has sacrificed her health, her happiness, and ultimately her life, in the service of her husband and children. His disparagement of her, manifest in his complete disregard of her words, her feelings, and even of her presence, is fully realised by Nance: ‘I wish her words were allowed to have some meaning, Father’ (45). In denying his wife’s words and feelings any meaning, Duncan denies her very self, and in so doing dismisses the significance of her sacrifice and of her life. The callous Duncan’s apparently genuine grief at her death is almost immediately superseded by his conviction that he has been a perfect husband, and shortly

afterwards by the arrival on the scene of his young and attractive second wife; thus Ellen's joyless life of devotion is poignantly ironised soon after her death.

In the case of Harriet (*Men and Wives*), readers are again struck by her inappropriate life-partner, the vain and silly—though kind-hearted—buffoon, Sir Godfrey. For Blanche Gaveston (*A Family and a Fortune*), the situation is different: her husband is initially presented as a sympathetic character, and, although he becomes less so, he is never tyrannical or foolish.

Blanche opens the novel, her peevish words to her officious daughter Justine an indication not only of their relationship but also of Blanche's frequent frame of mind:

‘Justine, I have told you that I do not like the coffee touched until I come down. How can I remember who has had it, and manage about the second cups if it is taken out of my hands? I don't know how many times I have asked you to leave it alone’ (5).

The exchange is soon followed by a lengthy paragraph (in Compton-Burnett terms) in the narrative voice, in which readers are informed that Blanche regards her children ‘with querulous affection’, that her manner is ‘somewhat strained’ (5), and that her movements are uncertain. The narrator tells readers, ‘She really gave little thought to herself and could almost be said to live for others’ (6), an evaluation which could be said to epitomise not only Patmore's vision of perfect womanhood but also the Christian ideal. However, as in the case of Ellen, there is no mention of her faith. During the breakfast-time conversation Blanche rather testily tries to convince her family that she has, as usual, slept badly the previous night. The children's teasing rejoinders illustrate their feelings for their mother: ‘[they] had for her a lively, if not the deepest, affection, and she was more than satisfied with it’ (6).

So far there has been no suggestion of a despotic or clownish husband to explain Blanche's apparent nervousness. However, several pages later, readers discover that the marital relationship, though affectionate, is not close, and that 'Blanche seemed to wander aloof through her life, finding enough to live for in the members of her family', whilst, significantly, 'Edgar's life was largely in his brother...' (18).

Blanche is an open and warm-hearted woman: when her sister asks if she and their father may rent the cottage on the Gaveston estate at minimum cost, Blanche would be happy to let them occupy it rent-free; she is pleased at the thought of welcoming her father and her sister; she does not foresee any difficulty in the proximity of her sister despite the doubts of her family, who are fully aware of the latter's egocentric spite and her continual attempts to disparage Blanche. Her reaction to Dudley's inheritance amply demonstrates her generous spirit: 'Dear Dudley, I do congratulate you. It is just what you deserve. I never was so glad about anything' (98). Her pleasure is still evident the following morning, and during the ensuing weeks she endeavours to curb any apparent greed on the part of her children, saying at one point, 'I should like to hear what your uncle is going to do for himself' (129). Dudley sums up her character, enhancing the narrative comment on p.6 of the novel: 'Blanche has the behaviour of a person who has no evil in her' (94).

Blanche continually leaps to the defence of the disabled Aubrey, sometimes almost losing control in her indignation; she is not sufficiently attuned to the moods and feelings of others to realise that her over-protectiveness embarrasses Aubrey (32). Nor is her inability to control her feelings with regard to Aubrey her only area of sensitivity, as readers discover when her children tease her about her supposed sleeplessness. However, Blanche appears to be less emotionally fragile than Harriet and Ellen: her problems seem to have their root in some innate weakness rather than

in self-imposed burdens or unhappy relationships. Her physical weakness and irritability contribute to readers' inference of frailty; they are not surprised by the onset of a cough, accompanied by a general debility. Blanche's deterioration is rapid: she is found to have a high fever, and despite apparently surviving the worst she soon suffers a relapse and dies. Her irritability is still present on her death bed. However, her last few utterances are revealing not only of her devotion to her family but also of what has possibly been one of the causes of her insecurity:

“.... Has Matty been here today?”

“She cannot come up here” ...

“Her brain is not really so much better than mine”.

“Father does not know that I am really a nicer person ...” (163).

During her illness, readers hear the opinions of Blanche of two other sympathetic characters. Justine speaks of ‘that strain of heroism and disregard of self’ (153); these words perfectly encapsulate the notion of the Angel in the House, but the qualities they signify are too heavy to be borne by Blanche. Miss Griffin's simple summary of Blanche and of her own feelings is less distressing for readers to contemplate: ‘I got to love her so much. She was so good’ (164).

In *Men and Wives*, Harriet Haslam's all-devouring love for her children is matched by her demands upon them: she expects Matthew, engaged in medical research led by his friend Dufferin, to follow what she perceives as his vocation and start to practise; she continually urges her second son, an aspiring poet, to become an academic; she is jealous of her youngest son's friendship with the ladies of the Calkin family, specifically Agatha, feeling that it is a slur on her own capacity as a

mother to meet his emotional needs. Her wishes for her daughter are domestic, but she is not satisfied with the possibility of the local vicar, Ernest Bellamy, as Griselda's husband. Sir Godfrey, despite his foolishness, does his best to support his wife and mitigate the effect she has on her children; ironically his best is not good enough and indeed exacerbates his wife's stress. One morning at breakfast, soon after Matthew has become entangled with the flighty Camilla, there is a series of altercations, a not uncommon occurrence, during which her harshly accusatory demeanour and her relationships with her children are revealed; the first is between Harriet and her eldest son Matthew, followed by one between Harriet and Jermyn, the second son; her daughter Griselda is her third victim. Sir Godfrey pleads with both Harriet and Matthew to be more tolerant of each other, but to no avail. Harriet turns her attention to Jermyn:

“You complain of my writing poetry, mother”, said Jermyn. “You ought to be thankful I am not a writer of tragedies, as a son of yours”.

“I should be thankful to see you really write anything, my son”.

“Oh, now, Harriet, that is not a fair thing to say”, said Godfrey, almost laughing. “You must not say things to the children to hit and hurt them ..... our children will do their best”.

“Well, I don't know what father expects me to do my best in,” said Griselda to her mother, making an unseen movement with her hand.

“My darling child!” said her father, in simple acknowledgement of the effort.

“I don't know either, my dear. .... It would be wasting words for me to tell you the turn I should like your life to take.”

Sir Godfrey asks his wife to 'leave the child alone...', adding that he can see no harm in Griselda's seeing the rector (to whom at the moment she is attracted).

"That is all you want for your only daughter, Godfrey?"

After Godfrey's placatory rejoinder, Matthew speaks again:

"Well, Father, Jermyn, Griselda, and I have been through the trial by ordeal. .... is Gregory to escape as usual?"

"Oh, Gregory would rather go and talk to a strange old woman than spend an hour with his mother", said Harriet in a suddenly wailing tone'.

This is too much for Matthew, who stands and addresses his mother at some length; he holds nothing back, concluding: 'But if you do not pull yourself up in time, you will find yourself one day a very lonely old woman'. His mother replies 'in a low tone of easy contempt, her eyes going slowly to him from lowered lids':

"So you have told us you are not going to speak any longer, Matthew. We might have been glad of that information before. As for my finding myself one day a very lonely old woman, I have found myself that for a very long time" (67- 9).

(Again, the extended attributions have a strong impact, conjuring up the image of the materfamilias seated at the breakfast table, condemning her children one by one.)

The scene does not end there, the recriminations continuing for another page and half, and ending 'at the sharp closing of his wife's door' (71).

So extreme is Harriet's 'strain' that she suffers a nervous breakdown and is hospitalised. Nor is she fully recovered on her return home after several months, when she finds that not only has family life continued without her but that it has been happier in her absence. In the extremity of her despair, she attempts suicide. Her children for their part are so oppressed by their mother's ambitions for them that her absence serves as a relief, and her return as an even heavier burden as she lapses into her old ways. The last straw for Matthew is Harriet's attempt to thwart his plans to marry Camilla, and his emotional torment causes him to murder his mother.

Deeply religious though she is, Harriet's love for her children is destructive. In her continual demands on them, backed up by her protestations of sleeplessness and ill-health, she is guilty of waging a campaign of emotional blackmail: 'Her role of martyred mother becomes an act of self-assertion' (Ingman, 96).

In all of the three cases discussed above, the devotion of the wife and mother to home and family is manifest. In *A House and its Head*, Ellen's love for her children is largely unstated; readers infer it, however, from her defence of them to her husband ('They could not be a better nephew and daughters than they are' (6)), from the narrator's presentation of Grant, who is 'loved by Ellen next to her own' (8), from Grant's protestations at Duncan's lack of attention to Ellen's apparent illness; and from Nance's response to her mother, of continual care and protection. Ellen's friends and neighbours too hold her in affection and esteem, evidenced by Florence and Fabian Smollett; this would not be the case if Ellen did not fulfil the prevailing expectations of motherhood (48, 50).

Ellen, Blanche, and Harriet represent the unreasoning dedication to the ideal of motherhood of the Victorian era. Whilst Ellen is defeated by a tyrant, it is

Blanche's innate frailty which prevents her from continuing to fulfil her role. Her death is followed by a deeply ironic reconfiguration of her family: not only does Maria replace her as Edgar's wife, she also establishes a strong bond with Blanche's favourite son, Aubrey, and the role enjoyed by Justine as her mother's helpmeet is no longer open to her. The gulf left by the death of the mother has been bridged, and thus it has been demonstrated that her sacrifice has been futile. In the case of Harriet, the end is more shocking and more violent: it is her own mental instability, exacerbated by her mismatched marriage, which brings about her breakdown and drives Matthew in particular to his desperate action. After her death readers find the family happily and ironically pursuing their lives as she would have wished: Matthew is practising his profession in London, Jermyn has returned to academic life in Cambridge, Gregory, having escaped from his old women, has married Polly, the younger Hardisty daughter, and Griselda has married Dr. Dufferin, her mother's preference for her. Godfrey reflects on his wife's good fortune in having 'everything turn out as she wished' (278); he continues, 'It is some compensation for being out of things, for passing on before, to see your wisdom bearing fruit. For it all followed on in a manner. Not that she needs compensation where she is now. It is we who need that' (278). The ironically humorous Rachel Hardisty has the last word, implying not only that Harriet was fortunate in life despite not realising it, but that now, in death, she has no need of compensation: 'Harriet was always a fortunate woman' (*Men and Wives*, 278).

Harriet has failed to realise her good fortune in having thoughtful and idealistic children, whose upbringing by a strongly principled mother and a kindly and affectionate father would result in sound sense and decency in maturity; she does not live to see this happy—but ironic—outcome.

In Ellen's case the poignancy is as great as in Blanche's (*A House and its Head* and *A Family and a Fortune* respectively); Ingman, in thinking of Ellen, is reminded of Dorothea about whom George Eliot writes, 'the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts'; readers hope that 'the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive' (*Middlemarch*, 896), and that 'those around her' will not leave her grave unvisited. Distressingly for the reader, though Ellen's children have found it difficult to accept Alison in their mother's place, Cassie is already almost a member of the family and therefore easily accepted. The sacrifices of the mothers have been in vain. Perhaps a greater irony is that for all three husbands, life seems to resume its course without visible disturbance.

Ellen, Harriet, and Blanche find themselves trapped in the patriarchal system, which requires a wife to serve her husband, sacrificing herself to him if necessary. All three have daughters, who have been brought up in the same structure of service and sacrifice. Justine (who is discussed below) has so far conformed to expectations, assisting her mother and carrying out parish duties, and marriage seems unlikely in her restricted social circle; the apparently fragile Griselda has nonetheless found the strength to resist marriage to the self-obsessed vicar and to choose a kindly and competent husband. Nance Edgeworth has tried to help her mother and been thwarted by her father; however, she is a strong-minded and independent thinker, for whom her reasoning powers cause constant discord between herself and her father. Nance is discussed in the section below, headed *Reasoning Women*. These daughters show signs of having learned from their mothers' sacrifice.

The ironic situation of Ellen, Harriet, and Blanche is clear: entangled in a structure which is beyond their control, they buckle under the weight of the unattainable ideals of wifedom and motherhood expected by the patriarchy.

Moreover, burdened by Original Sin (as they believe themselves to be), they realise the impossibility of these expectations; writing of Harriet Haslam, Kathy Justice Gentile expresses their dilemma forcefully; it is the dilemma of all mothers who aspire to be Angels in the House: ‘As a Christian, she is tormented by two conflicting representations of her role as mother – Eve, who carries the burden of original sin, and the sinless and self-effacing Madonna’ (Kathy Justice Gentile,54). The two representations are incompatible.

#### **d) Despotic matriarchs**

Harriet Haslam is discussed above as an example of an ‘Angel in the House’. It is fair to say that a different interpretation could be placed on her character. In her harrowing importunity of her children Harriet comes close to despotism: readers are only too aware of the force of her continual expressions of martyrdom (see above, Ingman, 96). Burkhart labels her a ‘love tyrant’, and maintains that ‘she remains a tyrant even after her death; her children fulfil the ambitions she had in her lifetime wished for them, and her husband is prevented by her will from remarrying’ (Burkhart, 72, 104).

About Sabine Ponsonby, however, no alternative interpretation is possible; she is a matriarch as despotic and cruel as any of Compton-Burnett’s patriarchs. Sabine believes in and accepts patriarchal structures; she cogently expresses the notion of wifely duty: ‘To marry a husband, live with him in intimacy and isolation, bear him children for survival or burial, and die in the effort to continue in this course, appeared to her an honourable history, dignified in life and death’ (6). Her strong-willed daughter Hetta has sacrificed herself, channelling her considerable

powers into the support of her brother in his work and of her mother in the upbringing of his children (see below).

In Sabine's dealings with her grandchildren, two of whom are boys and for whom she is responsible, she is harsh and unfeeling, and continually reproaches them for the cost of their upkeep. The tone of Sabine's interaction with them is made clear by the use of a characteristic 'hiss' to replace or modify the attributive verb 'said'; she addresses Clare, aged twenty-five, as if Clare is a child: "'Do you want to be sent out of the room like a child, girl?'" said Sabine with her sudden hiss' (*Daughters and Sons*, 49). She speaks to all five of her grandchildren, four of whom are seventeen, eighteen, twenty-four, and twenty-five years old, similarly: "'You are a set of stupid, inconsiderate children", hissed Sabine' (64). The situation of Sabine's two grandsons is equivocal; ruled over by a tyrannical matriarch assisted by her accomplice of the same gender and according to the precepts of the patriarchy, they have before them a model, albeit a cruel one, of the paterfamilias; however, their understanding of the terms 'matriarch' and 'patriarch' must at best be mistaken. The perception of gender roles they will take forward will be confused.

Sabine is cruel also to her employees, particularly to the unfortunate Miss Bunyan, the governess, whom she ridicules and humiliates, speaking to her in the same tone as to her grandchildren: "'Miss Bunyan", said Sabine, rounding on her with her hiss ... (60).

In *Brothers and Sisters* readers encounter the matriarch Sophia Stace, who is presented to the reader by means of a detailed description of her father, whom she is said to resemble closely. In her early years Sophia, a lonely child who is not close to her father, creates a persona for herself in order to satisfy her father's expectations

and at the same time to manipulate him and thus satisfy her wishes. Readers are told that ‘She certainly had no comfort to spare in the family group that included him [her father]. Their natures collided and found no complement in each other, and she took the method of gaining his esteem, of suppression of her character, and assumption of a sprightliness not her own’ (5-6). These lessons learned in childhood serve her in adulthood: ‘He [Christian, her husband] knew her little, and she knew him well, the relation between herself and her father, that seemed to her natural’ (25).

The narrator tells readers early in the novel that Sophia is beautiful, and throughout they are reminded of her beauty as an aspect of her dominance and power. Again assisted by the narrator, Sophia herself reveals her vanity by her tone of voice: “‘Beautiful?’” said Sophia, in astonishment at this tribute to looks so different from her own’ (69). Compunction for her treatment of her children leads her to seek them out; she nonetheless ‘settled her dress as she went’, for ‘No-one must see Sophia except in beauty’ (148). To an audience of one—her daughter—she reads the funeral service ‘in her beautiful, self-conscious voice’ (150). This is not the only reference to the self-consciousness of her behaviour. Even in a moment of genuine love and concern for her husband, readers learn that ‘Sophia in her extreme moments, when she suffered more than most, never ceased to listen to herself’ (122).

Early in the novel Sophia’s conceit is evident as she tells Dinah: ‘... you are not equal to your mother’ (28, 29). Perhaps the clearest exposition of her conceit is revealed by her response to her husband’s compliment: ‘Ah, you will never get to the end of finding what I can do ... You will always go on discovering that. I sometimes find myself marvelling at the gulf between the average person and myself’ (100).

In her insistence that she is deserving of respect and attention from her children, Sophia manifests her self-importance. Shortly after Christian’s departure

she chastises all three of them at some length for not behaving respectfully, ‘as if I were one of yourselves’ (30). A little later she berates Patty, in a lengthy paragraph, because she (Sophia) ‘can’t claim a little attention’ (36). Both selfishness and self-centredness are evident also in the demands she makes on her children. Andrew is concerned that his father’s unknown paternity may affect his own marriage. Sophia, despite her concern for her children, cannot forget her own interests for very long: ‘You don’t ask me what I want. ... You go on thinking of yourselves -- ... But you must think of me a little’ (92).

Melodrama is frequently the tone of Sophia’s intercourse with her children. When she learns of her husband’s heart condition, her speech to her elder son is a model of melodrama, in which she starts by speaking of herself in the third person: ‘Your mother will say all the words that are so hard to be said. She will do what has to be done. She will indeed have to now’ (124). Even her speech to her dead husband shows her far from lost for words; rather, her ‘gift for fluent speech’ is apparent as she sinks to the ground, asking thirteen rhetorical questions in nine lines, pausing only when ‘her voice reached a scream’ (135). A similarly immoderate speech, of nine lines, including four exclamations and five questions, occurs on pages 136-37.

There are several occasions on which the narrative voice briefly interpolates in order to emphasise the force of Sophia’s personality and its impact on her household. Immediately after Christian’s death, the narrator points up not only Sophia’s impact on her children but also its lifelong effect: ‘.... unconscious that she sent a shiver through her son and daughter, that was to return to them all their lives...’ (137). A similarly predictive interpolation, again full of foreboding, follows shortly afterwards: ‘The cloud of their future fell on them, with Sophia over them, dependent

on them' (140). Sophia's dominance is felt by Patty also, again expressed in a simple, powerful sentence: 'Patty went out of the room, with a face of simple fear of the future, under Sophia's untempered sway' (150). A longer interpolation, of two paragraphs, explains Sophia's attitude and behaviour ten months after Christian's death: 'The sons and daughter looked older and out of heart. Sophia was bent on harbouring her stores for their future, and seemed to give little thought to the sacrifice of their youth' (177). Lest readers should think that to her credit Sophia's main concern is her children, the narrator continues:

'She overstressed the significance of her widowhood, magnified her married happiness, and forgot what she had daily taken into account in her husband's life, that this feeling was for the personality she had presented as herself. It stood simply that her children could not leave her while her widowhood was young. She regarded their share in her sorrow less as a claim on her sympathy than as a support; and their married life as, even in their own thoughts, subordinate to the ending of her own' (177).

Here, Sophia's use of emotional blackmail, visible throughout the novel in the service of her monstrous ego, is forcefully explicated by the narrator.

It must not be thought that Sophia is entirely without maternal or wifely feeling. On occasion, she reveals a certain pathos: on hearing the news of Christian's illness, readers are told: 'This first moment in her life of placing restraint on herself was terrible to her' (121). Her immediate reaction to Christian's death is sincere: 'And I have been so distraught and absent-minded with him the last few days' (136). These words evoke surprise in her hearers: they do not usually hear any acknowledgement of fault from Sophia. Later, she again reveals the genuine pathos of her situation: '...no one thinks of me now; and there was someone who thought of

me first of all' (187). Perhaps the most poignant moment is when the narrative voice tells readers: 'Happiness, of which she was held to have had so much, had never been real to Sophia' (239). There can be no doubt that Sophia emerges as an unsympathetic character: it has been amply demonstrated that her total egocentrism has blighted the childhood and youth of her children. Andrew, the elder son, gives way to his emotions after their father's death: '...What have we all done, that we should be tortured and deprived of a minute's ease, at one of the worst times of our lives?' (165). Readers are reminded of Sophia's father's description of himself: '...no man had ever despised him, and no man had ever broken him in' (1). The narrative voice continues: '... all had given up effort to improve him, few had loved him, and none were at ease in his presence' (1). Both of these comments are true of his daughter: 'hated' and 'feared' can be substituted for 'despised', and only Christian, who did not understand her true nature, has ever loved her. The irony surrounding her is profound: Sophia persistently chastises her children for their ineffectuality and lack of consideration, failing to realise that it is she who has brought them up and might be expected to have inculcated such qualities. Moreover, her perception of herself is both sadly and bitterly ironic: believing herself, not without reason, to be beautiful and capable, in control of her world and loved by those around her, she fails to realise that this view is not shared by family and friends. Thus she comes to inhabit a world of self-delusion. Only her husband loves her, but without 'knowing' her; her neighbours and members of her extended family are aware of her domineering and inflexible nature, her once-devoted servant and her close family members have always suffered at her hands, and whilst it is true that death duties play a part in their decision to go to London, it is also the case that in their resentment they are desperate to escape from the family home.

Sophia's self-presentation as the 'patriarch', the strong, capable head of her house and estate, is not a surprise; she has after all inherited the characteristics of her father. Throughout her depiction it is clear that her persona coincides with Susan Sontag's description expressed in Note 10 of her *Notes on Camp*, and discussed by Eltis: '.... To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre' (cited in Cleto, p.56).

The widower Sir Andrew Stace, Sophia's father, has, as expected, followed the dictates of his tradition, and bequeathed his estate to Christian, his adopted son, and an allowance to his daughter: it appears that the estate has passed to a male heir according to tradition, although that male heir is not of the family blood-line; already there appears to be a dilution of the true tradition of the landed family. The irony continues: despite Sophia's horror at her father's abuse of his power, she herself commits a startlingly powerful act by concealing an important letter (which reveals that Christian is Sir Andrew's natural son and therefore Sophia's half-brother), thus enabling her to marry Christian. She simply takes over what has been her father's property and role, breaking free from the patriarchal order: the narrative voice soon reinforces Sophia's position and her self-belief: 'The seat [at the head of the table] was symbolic of Sophia's position in the household. Neither in outward nor inward things had the place of the head been Christian's. From old Mr. Stace's death it had simply been Sophia's. Many things were simply Sophia's at Moreton Edge' (25).

In overthrowing the patriarchy Sophia not only assumes control over the property and estate and takes up her role in the community, which includes the same narrow circle as in the previous novels discussed; she also subjects her children to her father's pattern of control, requiring them to anticipate and accommodate

themselves to her moods and conform to her standards and expectations.

Underpinning paternal structures is the assumption that wives, and in the absence of a wife, a daughter, will sacrifice herself to the patriarch. As a result of her successful reversal of patriarchal tenets, however, Sophia must act against received notions of motherhood and womanhood in general, that woman's function is to be a wife and mother. Both she and Sabine give the lie to the assumption that maternal feeling is natural; rather, it is a role which women are expected to perform; this subversive notion is unequivocally expressed by Miss Rosetti in *More Women than Men*, discussed below.

Sabine Ponsonby and Sophia Stace are so conditioned by the patriarchal system that even when they are acting alone they follow the hierarchical structures of patriarchal dominance. Sabine makes it clear in the quotation above (*Daughters and Sons*, 6) that she sees it as her duty to follow in her husband's footsteps. Sophia has followed her father's precepts, bringing up her sons and daughter in the same patriarchal mould, of family and inheritance. Sophia's daughter Dinah, however, despite having been reared by Sophia within the traditional structure, overturns the framework and escapes, as does her brother; nor does she escape into marriage with a suitable male member of the same class in the same or a neighbouring county. A move to the capital indicates a new way of life, and it will be a life with her brother. Andrew and Dinah Stace are not the only brother-sister pairing in this novel; they are discussed under the heading *Class and Family: The Novels*. Similar relationships are found in several of Compton-Burnett's books; in suggesting not only the viability but even the desirability of this unconventional pairing, the novelist is proposing one of a range of alternative ways of life.

Sabine clearly illustrates the quandary of the mother/daughter relationship. Believing as she does that it is woman's duty to sacrifice herself to the men of the family, Sabine has not demurred as her daughter Hetta has devoted her life to helping her brother, both in his work as a novelist and in assisting Sabine herself with the upbringing of his children; in so doing, Hetta has developed an unhealthy devotion to her brother.

John is grateful to his sister but his gratitude does not prevent him from marrying; he is unaware of the depth of Hetta's feelings for him, and is distressed when his sister, her position in his life threatened, loses her mental balance and fakes suicide in an effort to convince the family of her indispensability. Finding to her dismay that the family (and in particular her brother) can manage without her, she takes refuge in an inappropriate marriage, to the obsequious Reverend Geoffrey Chaucer.

Since Sabine, by her own act, engineered the marriage of John and Edith, who has started to usurp her sister-in-law Hetta's position, she has been aware of the latter's unhappy situation. When Sabine reads her daughter's suicide note, the enormity of Hetta's long sacrifice (to her brother for want of a father) and the part she, Sabine, has played in allowing it to happen, suddenly overwhelm her, and she expresses her anguish and guilt at length: '... What have we done to her between us? I did not know what I was doing. I ought to have known. I was her mother; I ought not to have let them hound and hurt her, people stronger and younger than she. I ought not to have let them; I ought not. I ought not' (245). A few moments later she continues: 'My Hetta, my daughter! Why do women think of men? Why do mothers think of sons, when they have their daughters? Men can think of themselves. She was a woman and helpless. She has been sacrificed to others, my

daughter' (246). The lower half of the same page is taken up by a long paragraph passionately regretting her treatment of her daughter. The language is emotional and repetitive, and has a powerful impact on her listeners, amongst whom is John, who is 'free from his deepest pity and faces her' (247). Too late the contradiction between the notion of the ideal woman as wife and mother and that of daughterly sacrifice has come home to Sabine: Hetta's sacrifice, which has been condoned and even assisted by Sabine, has prevented Hetta's attainment of the feminine ideal. Once again the incompatibility of the Church's demands is revealed: a daughter who is required to sacrifice herself to her father (or her brother) cannot at the same time hope to fulfil the role of wife and mother.

Sabine does not fully recover from the shock of her realisation, but manages to live to see Chaucer putting his arms round Hetta, whereupon she 'thrust her head forward with a sharp, uncertain light upon it, as if she looked on something which both seared and satisfied her soul, and then, with a sound almost of a satisfied sigh, relapsed with a single shudder and remained as she was seen' (285). Readers note the uncertainty of the light, the juxtaposition of 'seared' and 'satisfied', the less than satisfied sigh, the shudder: Sabine's struggle to reconcile the irreconcilable results in a conflicted death.

**e) 'Spinsters of this parish'** (*see Introduction, p. 35*)

It is not surprising that there are several examples of the 'spinsters of this parish' in these seven novels, single women who, perhaps fortunately for them, do not need to work in order to survive but who spend their lives clustering round the church and its rector for want of a husband and family. Such women are undoubtedly of valuable

service to the Church; in Compton-Burnett's novels some are mocked, others are depicted with humour and compassion.

In *Men and Wives* readers meet the younger Dabis sisters and the Hardisty sisters, who gather in a group with other single ladies to provide garments for the poor, and gossip. The melodramatic rector is married but awaiting divorce at the beginning of the novel, and engaged to be married for a second time in the middle. However, having been rejected again, he finds himself at the end engaged to one of the Dabis sisters, seven years his senior but apparently quite willing to take on the twice-rejected Reverend Ernest Bellamy, itself an ironic comment on the position of unmarried women.

*A House and its Head* provides three such maiden ladies, Beatrice, Rosamund, and Dulcia, who have already been discussed under the heading Chorus. It is Rosamund who first demonstrates the typical behaviour of such spinsters by promptly handing out a tract at what seems to her to be an appropriate moment, and it is Rosamund also whose body-language first reveals tell-tale signs of a focus on the rector: in her first utterance, concerning the rector but not addressed to him, she speaks 'looking at Oscar, and moving her feet' (20).

Later in the novel, during Gretchen's last illness, it is Beatrice who, several times and alone, visits her on her death bed; even she, however, dares not offer the counsel she would have liked to give. A relatively rare and sharply poignant example of dramatic irony occurs when the narrative voice again interpolates: Beatrice 'was never to know that her purpose of brightening a deathbed had been fulfilled' (210); Beatrice may not know, but readers are told, that she has indeed brightened Gretchen's deathbed.

Both Beatrice and Rosamund reveal a somewhat unrealistic view of men and marriage. In a conversation about Duncan's marriage to Alison, his second wife, Beatrice expresses her view of second marriages: 'I have such a prejudice against a second marriage ... I can never understand a woman's becoming one of the parties in one ... It seems to me that the essence of it would be the singleness of the experience' (100,101). On this occasion her cousin supports her view, and again the latter's body-language is revealing: "Repeated it would be besmirched," said Miss Burtenshaw, her colour deepening' (101). Readers infer that Rosamund's changes of colour are suggestive of sexual frustration, whereas for Beatrice such frustration manifests itself in excessive piety. Her final words to the newly-weds Grant and Sibyl, spoken 'in a low voice', are: "May your union be blessed" (173).

On their way home after seeing Sibyl and Grant off, Beatrice soon broaches what is uppermost in her mind: 'Talking of Christian names ... I don't know what Mr. Jekyll was thinking of, when he said goodbye. He called me by my Christian name as loud as you please. I did not know quite where to turn my eyes' (177). In the face of her cousin's dismissive rejoinder, she makes it clear that she is still rather flustered by Oscar's familiarity, thus betraying the intensity of her reaction: 'Yes, he said it quite casually and easily, as if he had thought of me like that. Well, he is quite welcome to, if he likes: I have no objection' (177). Rosamund cannot refrain from attempting to trivialise Oscar's slip. The episode of Oscar's use of Beatrice's Christian name takes up one and a half pages. That such a minor incident should be the subject of such a prolonged discussion offers insights into both the cousins' state of mind and their relationship, and illustrates the importance that Oscar's almost certainly inadvertent use of her Christian name has assumed in Beatrice's mind and the significance of such 'events' in the lives of the cousins.

Rosamund is less inclined to reveal her feelings than Beatrice. Nonetheless, neither of the cousins is able to conceal what is in her mind at the Dorcas meeting after Gretchen's death. Refusing Oscar's offer of help to fold up the sewing, Rosamund says, 'No, I have nothing to say to a woman afraid to use her hands. She would not be much good in a parish' (220). Beatrice indulges in a little daydreaming: "He seems really pleased about his sister's child. It helps one to realise what he would be like as a father", said Beatrice with her usual thought for others, as she was herself independent of aid' (220). Rosamund's next remark indicates her agreement with Dulcia, that it is perhaps not yet time to think of Oscar as a father, but the extended attribution makes it clear that the same thought is in the back of her mind: "It certainly is rather premature", agreed Miss Burtenshaw, content with preliminary steps' (220). Discussing names for the baby, Beatrice 'lightly' suggests Oscar, after his uncle' (220). This time the attribution after Rosamund's utterance indicates that the idea of Oscar as a father is coming to the forefront of her mind: "That name should wait for a son of his own", said Miss Burtenshaw, who had advanced in fancy' (220). On the following page she is less openly expressive: "... his qualities fit him for fatherhood", said Miss Burtenshaw, now with simple terseness' (221). The idea of Oscar as a father is now causing Rosamund emotional turmoil to the extent that she does not want to dwell on the thought.

Four short utterances and three subtly implicatory extended attributions from the narrator have taken readers on Rosamund's journey: the almost subconscious thought of her own usefulness as a vicar's wife, the willingness to wait before contemplating the possibility of a child, the actuality of a son and even his name, and finally a degree of tension which requires that she end the conversation. This tension

is emphasised by the immediately preceding insertion from the narrator: ‘The cousins took up their sewing, and desisted, as though wrought up in some way’ (221). Nor does the narrator forget the other spinster; the deeply ironic attribution quoted above (‘with her usual thought’), and the adverb (‘lightly’) which suggests Beatrice’s consciousness of her hearers’ possible reaction, even if unspoken, remind readers of her daydreams whilst provoking a smile which lightens a potentially pathetic situation. The tension reaches its height when Oscar’s impending return is mentioned, which causes Beatrice to get up and start folding her sewing. Rosamund’s reaction is immediate: “‘What are you going to do?’” said her cousin at once’ (221). Beatrice explains that she is folding up her work so as to be able to show Oscar the choir accounts: ‘He gave me orders not to let him escape’, she tells her cousin, thus stressing her indispensability. As he enters Oscar asks the result of the discussion about possible names, and the conversation is carried on for a few moments by others, thus allowing the diffusion of the cousins’ strain.

Despite Beatrice’s subservience to the rather curmudgeonly Rosamund and occasional jealousy between the two, they do not fail each other at one of their difficult moments. After learning that Oscar is engaged to Nance Edgeworth, the narrative voice is compassionate in describing their walk home; they walk ‘with their arms linked and their feet in step’, a rare harmony which readers learn is more than simply physical: they are ‘bound by mutual sympathy, mutual relief that neither was preferred to her friends, and a deep, almost sub-conscious gladness that their life was to remain unchanged’ (225). By the time they reach home their relief is such that they can fall back ‘in fits of laughter’ (225) at Alexander’s teasing.

Presented as figures of fun, Beatrice and Rosamund are fully rounded characters, as is Dulcia. The depiction of all three is profoundly ironic: Rosamund,

an ex-missionary who is lazy and somewhat surly, Beatrice, determined to 'do good', whose misfortune it is never to be taken seriously. It is hardly surprising that these women, members of such a social class, brought up to believe in the sanctity of marriage and child-rearing and their essence as the aim and fulfilment of a woman's life, yet remaining unmarried, should become socially and sexually frustrated. Rosamund is cruelly betrayed by physical signal, whilst Beatrice sublimates her frustration into the profession of her faith. Like so many of their kind, they seek compensation in daydreams of the unmarried rector of the parish. The reader shares the narrator's compassion when, despite the bickering, it becomes clear not only that the cousins are mutually supportive and sympathetic, but also that they accept the relief of remaining unmarried; perhaps the words of the cousins themselves best express their feeling: 'I don't know if there is some sort of feeling of escape in the spinster population ... when this sort of thing happens. Perhaps there is'. Beatrice replies, 'There is the actuality, anyhow' (225).

*Pastors and Masters* provides an example of another maiden lady. Lydia Fletcher is not a rounded character but rather a caricature of the maiden lady of the time. Aged sixty, she lives in the home of her brother, the rector of the local church, who is married, and her nephew his curate; she dedicates her life to good work in the parish. She is introduced in the same paragraph as the two clergymen, Peter Fletcher and his nephew Francis: 'His sister, Miss Lydia Fletcher, was a clumsy-looking woman of sixty, with a broad, flat, benevolent face' (29). Readers immediately know that she is single, elderly, and, whilst not very attractive in appearance, well-meaning; they also know that she is Peter's sister. Further inferences may be drawn: she is either of independent means or dependent on her brother (it becomes clear later that she has 'an income of her own' (38)), she spends her time on parish work,

but she is probably not one of those whose sexual frustrations are focused on the rector.

Her first utterance is spoken ‘in a mysterious undertone, with her hand over her mouth’ (29); her second is attributed by ‘murmured Miss Lydia’ (30). Thus readers become aware of her idiosyncrasies of speech, which continue to be highlighted by the narrator. She speaks of ritualism, ‘rolling the r’ (30). Her next three utterances are spoken ‘in a mysterious, piercing whisper’, with ‘her voice suggesting unworthiness in Mr. Merry’, and ‘raising her eyes but not her head’ (31). During this conversation she has also spoken ‘looking in front of her’ instead of at her listeners, and in response to a provocative question from her sister-in-law’s friend she does not reply but simply ‘looked at the table’ (30).

Her tendency to repeat herself soon appears: “‘Ah, but these ritualists do harm. They do harm.....,’ and quickly becomes more noticeable: “‘No. Not without help, no..... For we can’t do things without help. No’” (30). Readers wonder at the peculiarities of her speech: are they perhaps the result of extreme self-consciousness?

It is not only her speech habits and patterns which ring oddly in the ear. It is difficult to see the relevance (to Peter Fletcher’s comment about not ‘offering oneself as an example to one’s elders and betters’ (*Pastors and Masters*, p.29)) of her remark concerning self-control and the necessity of help; her utterance concerning ritualism is irrelevant to what has preceded it; she introduces a new topic of conversation which has no bearing on the previous one: “‘Where do your boys attend church?’” (31); and a few moments later she interrupts the conversation on employment with an enquiry on a completely different matter: “‘Mrs. Merry is a good religious woman?’” (31). By this point Miss Lydia is firmly fixed in the reader’s mind, not only as the

type of spinster described above, but as a decidedly eccentric example of the type: given to repetitive speech uttered in strange tones and unable or unwilling to make eye-contact or participate in the normal flow of conversation. Further, the utterance suggestive of Mr. Merry's unworthiness and her pointed question with regard to his wife's religious devotion indicate an excessive piety and an element of self-righteousness.

Shortly after, readers discover what Miss Lydia considers her province to be: "I must just trot across to the post.... I have had to write to all my men, and tell them that my men's class will not be held on Thursday. Dear souls, they will be so disappointed; but I could not help it, or I would indeed". She goes on a moment later: "I am so sad to disappoint my dear men things, who understand me so. I don't often fail them. Not often. I know I am different with women. I admit it. But men don't often elude me. Not often" (33).

Her repetitive speech pattern is ever more noticeable, the self-consciousness previously suggested now transmuted into a much deeper emotion as her mind turns to her 'dear men things'. Unable to focus her sexual frustration on her brother or her nephew, she appears to have transferred it to the men of the parish.

Lydia's own words, with assistance from the narrative voice, have revealed both her self-righteousness and, more seriously, her principal preoccupation. It has become clear from her patterns and idiosyncrasies of speech, and from her inability to participate normally in the conversation of her social circle, that Lydia Fletcher is at best eccentric; given the content of what she reveals about the workings of her mind and the nature of her parish activities, it is not over-stating the case to label her delusional and unbalanced.

There is a profound irony in the depiction of a devout woman, related to and living with two clergymen, who undoubtedly undertakes a great deal of parish work, as ridiculous and clearly deluded. Lydia is portrayed as lacking any positive qualities: she is idiosyncratic in speech, eccentric in manner, and ridiculously convinced of her appeal to, and special affinity with, her 'menfolk', towards whom she has channelled her sexual energy. With the exception of her brother and possibly her nephew, those around her view her with derision or dislike. The extreme nature of Lydia's characteristics strongly satirises the frustrated spinsters who gather round the church and its vicar in Compton-Burnett's novels.

At first sight Justine Gaveston (*A Family and a Fortune*), might appear to be another such spinster; however, she is a character for whom not only her family but the reader also feels affection. R.F. Kiernan's insight into Justine as 'officious' (K, 145) is revealed as justified: the novel opens with sharp words from Blanche to her daughter for pouring out the breakfast coffee before she, Blanche, comes down (see above, *A Family and a Fortune*, 5). She is presented only briefly, in a paragraph in which far more significance is accorded to the description of her mother, whom Justine is said to resemble. Readers learn that she is pleasant-looking but appears younger than her thirty years. The impression gained from the paragraph is that Justine 'shadows' her mother, in the sense not only of physical resemblance but also of function in the household. Shortly after, we learn that she has inherited from her father 'a suggestion of utter honesty' (ibid.,9); thus readers are fully acquainted with Justine.

Justine is devoted to both her father and her uncle, Dudley, delighting in 'those two tall figures' (20) as they walk arm-in-arm round the garden, and convinced that as his only daughter she holds a special place in her father's

affections. Her officiousness continues to reveal itself as she urges her youngest brother to eat his breakfast and get ready for his tutor, whom she has instructed to make the conversation during their morning walk educational. When her mother reproaches her: 'I think you should leave that kind of thing to father or me', Justine is quick to rebut the suggestion: 'Indeed I should not, Mother. And not have it done at all? That would be a nice alternative. I should do all I can for you all, as it comes into my head, as I always have and always shall. Don't try to prevent what is useful and right' (16-17).

However, Justine recognises her own failings: 'Come, come, Mother, I was tactless, I admit' (13). She is perceptive too in her insights into others. Her affection and concern for her uncle is evident early in the novel. Her response to his assertion that Matty and her father will soon 'find their attention' drawn to him acknowledges that '...then it will be all up with anyone else' (22). A moment later, seeing her father and Dudley walking outside, she exclaims, 'Those two tall figures! ... It is a sight of which I can never tire ... (22). These words are repeated during the course of the novel.

As the intensity of Dudley's devotion to his brother becomes apparent, Justine reveals not only her affection for her uncle but also her sensitivity and understanding in regard to both him and the family in general. As Edgar and Maria are seen approaching on their return from their honeymoon, Dudley, having said that he cares only for the approval of others, says to Justine, 'Welcome to my brother and the woman who preferred him to me'; Justine, realising the extent to which Dudley is emotionally dependent on the good opinion of the family (and particularly of Edgar), and that his present attitude will not win anyone's sympathy, offers her uncle some gentle advice: 'I should put it out of my mind, once and for all. That is the way to

gain your own good opinion and mine' (219). Her words are sufficient to enable Dudley to recover his equilibrium.

Justine, like her vicious Aunt Matty, has a passion to be needed: unlike the latter, however, she is warm-hearted and generous. Her officiousness arises from a genuine love for her family and from affection for her family home (see *Class and Family: the Novels*) and her kind heart is revealed in her work for the poor of the parish. Unlike the rest of her family, she reveals her sincere disregard for money: readers believe her assertion that she wants only enough to help those parishioners to whom she feels committed.

At the end of the novel, however, despite her contentment as she sees 'those two tall figures' walking together, Justine is left without the pivotal role in her father's life that she had desired, and in Aubrey's life she has been displaced by her stepmother. She is already old in terms of finding a husband, and in any case her social circle is restricted. Will she become one of the 'surplus women', perhaps dependent on her brother the squire, whose life is spent in 'good works' for want of a husband, home, and children?

Dudley's realisation that his relationship with his brother is sufficient for his happiness, and Justine's clearly hopeful frame of mind as the novel ends ('The pair [Edgar and Dudley] went out and walked on the path outside the house, and Justine, catching the sight from the window, rose with a cry and ran to fetch her brothers' (287)) suggest a less unhappy ending than is sometimes the case in Compton-Burnett's novels, generating in readers the hope that Justine's warm heart will survive forthcoming vicissitudes.

**f) Reasoning Women** (*see Introduction, pp. 27, 39*)

Amongst Compton-Burnett's spinsters are some who appear to have thought about their position and have succeeded, or succeed during the course of the novel, in achieving a certain degree of emancipation: strong and intelligent women who are unmarried at the beginning of the novel but who later marry; Nance Edgeworth and Cassie Jekyll (*A House and its Head*), Edith Haslam (*Daughters and Sons*), Helen Keats (*More Women than Men*), and Maria Sloane (*A Family and a Fortune*), embark, for different reasons, on what promises to be a happy marriage in which four of them hope to have an equal voice, a notion of marriage in itself subversive of the traditional ideal. Three of them - Cassie, Edith, and Maria - are, from the outset, in an enviably detached position in regard to the family-protagonist, thus enabling them to think and behave rationally, untrammelled by familial emotional complexities. Helen Keats, a newcomer to the staff of Josephine Ponsonby's school, is only lightly characterised; she speaks freely in the rather claustrophobic atmosphere, and is sufficiently sensible - and intrepid - to marry Felix Bacon. Edith Haslam, an independently-minded governess who is able to defend herself against Sabine and Hetta Ponsonby, and who recognises her rather precarious position as a no-longer-young governess, wisely accepts her employer's proposal of marriage. In the case of Maria Sloane, however, readers are not initially convinced that she is a sympathetic character: she is a close friend of the vicious Matty, and breaks off her engagement to Dudley in favour of his brother the squire. However, she makes clear her intention not to aid and abet Matty in her battles against the Gavestons, and gradually reveals her quiet wisdom by her interventions at difficult moments. Fairly early in her relationship with Edgar Justine urges her to exert her authority: 'We have seen that you can do so' (213). Maria demurs: 'I should not want to do so, if I had it. I know

that I have not been here for the last thirty years. I shall begin my life with you when I begin it. That is to be the future' (213). Josephine Napier and Maria Rosetti, at the end of the novel *More Women than Men*, are the principal figures in what might be described as the most interesting ending of these seven novels. Josephine is a widow who has not grieved too deeply for her late husband, while Maria gave birth, many years ago, to an illegitimate son. They are now embarking on both a personal and professional relationship, which bodes well for both of them. As in the case of Felix and Helen, this ending might just qualify as a happy one (see Introduction, p.27; Part Two, Ch. 3, c)).

Cassandra (Cassie) Jekyll, a detached quasi-member of the Egerton family (*A House and its Head*) already referenced as a governess and companion, is respected, even loved, by the 'children'; she has been a source of support to Ellen, and is respected even by Duncan because she is of good family: 'Cassie was a well-born woman, and held her own in his house, and his treatment of her was in accordance with his traditions' (26). Cassie's capable voice is heard throughout the novel, and towards the end, when the family is expecting Sibyl's return, she reveals wisdom and understanding: 'The wrong is never the only thing a wrong-doer has done ... That is the pathos of criminals. No class has a greater. Grant has met other things in Sibyl, and will meet them again' (228). Nor does her composure fail her at the moment of her mother's death; to shield Oscar against the impact of Gretchen's admission that she has always loved Cassie more than her brother, Cassie tells him, 'Mother did not live her last moments well' (211).

When Nance asks Cassie why she is willing to marry Duncan, Cassie expresses her decision clearly, and in doing so explicates the decision of many women in her situation: 'I want a provision for my future. Oscar [her brother] must

build his own life when my mother dies. And I have lived with your father for twenty years. It is not remarkable that I can spend some more with him' (169). It would be unrealistic for the eminently sensible Cassie to expect the tyrannical Duncan to accept her equality, but the reasoning process she expresses for accepting his proposal is sound, and readers are confident of her success in maintaining a successful, if not loving, married life.

Nance Edgeworth may be said to be the heroine of *A House and its Head*; she is the only character in these seven novels about whom this statement can be made. In her first utterances she makes clear her defiance of her father, the despot Duncan, and in doing so her courage in defying him:

'Well, Nance, you have condescended to join us?'

'If that is the word you would use, Father. I felt simply that I was joining you'.

She asks if she should open her presents immediately, or wait for the late arrivals.

'Have we waited for you?' Duncan asks.

'I observed you had, Father, was indeed struck by it. But was the process congenial enough to be emulated?' (7).

It is clear that not only does she challenge her father but also that she does so with tongue in cheek. This is Nance's usual mode of conversation with Duncan; she and her cousin Grant frequently collude in *sotto voce* conversation at Duncan's expense, as has been illustrated in the section c) Presentation of Speech, *Sotto Voce* conversation.

In contrast to her sister Sibyl, a manipulative and unscrupulous seventeen-year-old, Nance is straightforward in her speech and attitudes; in response to Sibyl's exclamation: 'Poor Father! ... I am afraid he is disappointed in us,' Nance replies, 'I can hardly believe that possible. ... I don't pretend to follow his line of thought, if he is.' Sibyl asks if Nance thinks she is perfect, to which Nance replies, 'As a daughter I do, absolutely. I can't take any other view.' She goes on: 'If there is room for improvement in you, improve, Sibyl.... I can see none in myself' (19). Nance's tone may be drily humorous, but her message to Sibyl is clear.

Her courage is demonstrated in the direct manner in which she tackles her father about Ellen's running of the household. Ellen has been unable to buy presents for the servants out of the money Duncan has given her, which arouses Duncan's scorn, causing Nance to defend her mother.

'The money has gone on many domestic expenses', said Nance. 'You forget the sacredness of the home, Father. You and I will stay away from church, and consider the quarter's bills, and arrange an allowance on the basis of them' (12).

Duncan expresses a sharp rebuke, asking Nance when the running of the house became her business. Not only her courage but also her awareness of her mother's frailty is demonstrated by her reply: 'It has been my business since I saw it was imperative. For some time now' (12).

Nance continues to support her mother as she falls ill; when Duncan asks when Ellen will be ready to set off for church, Nance is quick to respond: 'She is going to bed, of course, Father. She is ready to go now' (46). An altercation follows before Duncan accepts defeat and leaves the house, followed by Grant and Sibyl.

During the service Dr. Smollett leaves the church, having been summoned by Nance. The following day Ellen dies, making clear on her deathbed that she has realised which member of the family has cared for her most: 'I know that Nance has loved me .... I like people to show those things, myself' (53).

Nance's strength of character is revealed after the flight of Alison, Duncan's second wife, leaving her and Grant's son behind. Nance remains calm throughout the ordeal, and is her usual straightforward self in dealing with Grant's proposal of marriage: 'There are the reasons against it, that always hold good. I feel to you as a sister, and there is someone else' (160). It is Nance too, rather than Oscar himself, who announces her marriage to Oscar to the Dorcas meeting.

One of the first things Nance does after her engagement is to tell Oscar the Edgeworth family 'secret' – that it is Sibyl who brought about the death of Richard, Grant's and Alison's son: 'It was not suitable for our first secret. I am a believer in secrets between husbands and wives, but they are better when they arise naturally after marriage' (226). Her practical attitude is demonstrated again in the ensuing discussion of the sums of money each of them will receive annually from Sibyl: 'Money is the root of all evil. I am glad of my inheritance, even as things are. It is the root of as much evil in me as that' (227). When asked how she feels about welcoming her sister home, she is honest in the expression of her feelings, whilst revealing that her wry sense of humour is still present: 'My natural affection is asserting itself. Or I am imagining it is, because affection seems so much better than avarice. The evil probably includes self-deception' (227).

Nance again illustrates the honesty which readers feel is bound to be a feature of her marriage. When Oscar asks if she had realised that he was afraid of Duncan,

Nance replies, 'I know it now, as you know things about me. The moment has to come, when neither is as the other thought, and nothing can be the same again. It is better to get it over' (228). The marriage of the wise and intelligent Nance and the rational, humorous, and tactful Oscar promises surely promises well.

In several of Compton-Burnett's novels the names of famous writers are introduced, sometimes as characters. In these seven novels readers find (Nicholas) Herrick, the owner of the school in *Pastors and Masters*, and Jane Austen, who is discussed in the same novel; Compton-Burnett's tongue is firmly in her cheek as she attributes to unsympathetic characters the sort of superficial opinions often expressed by the prejudiced: 'I am afraid ... that I have very little use for books written by ladies for ladies ...', says Francis Fletcher in *Pastors and Masters* (94). His remark is followed a few moments later by Miss Basden's opinion of Jane Austen: 'Personally, I can't get over the littleness in her books' (94). *A House and its Head* features the Edgeworth family, though none of the members is called Maria. In *Brothers and Sisters* the Reverend Edward Dryden appears, already referenced as one of the Compton-Burnett gallery of unsympathetic clergymen, whilst in *More Women than Men* readers meet (Maria) Rosetti (*sic*), (Felix) Bacon, (Helen) Keats, and the Reverend Jonathan Swift, also referenced in the section on The Church in introducing this last, the narrative voice is openly ironic: 'His parents, realising that he bore the surname of a famous man, had given him also the Christian name, by way of doing all in their power towards equality...' (21).

In these seven novels four writers make their appearance as writers, only one of them male, John Ponsonby (*Daughters and Sons*). The three others are strong and capable women, who properly belong under this heading. One of them, Mellicent Hardisty (*Men and Wives*), is simply aspiring at this stage. France Ponsonby

*(Daughters and Sons)* has already enjoyed some success, whilst Charity Marcon *(Daughters and Sons)* is an established biographer. The last also features as a camp character and a choric voice, and is discussed under those two headings. Two of the women listed here, France and Charity, already earn their own living, and there is no reason to suspect that Mellicent will not do the same. The narrative voice provides them with sensible and intelligent voices, but the presence of so many literary names, not all of them appealing or conventional, indicates Compton-Burnett's gentle ironising of her own profession. This is particularly so in the case of Charity Marcon.

Compton-Burnett's choice of female writers to portray competent professional women is ironic: women such as France Ponsonby and Charity Marcon are depicted as quite capable not only of managing their own lives but also of having a successful career. A further ironic suggestion is that for women writers it is preferable to remain unmarried, as is certainly the case with Charity and probably with France. Rachel Hardisty is quite open in telling her stepdaughter Mellicent, '... a selfish life is lovely, darling ...' (264).

### **g) Victims**

It has already been noted that governesses, nurses, and companions can be bullied by their employers; unmarried, and without either family members or private means to support them, they are forced to take up employment. Governesses and companions may be seated at the family table, but they are by no means treated as the equals of the family. In her position of subservience to the family and yet socially superior to the servants, there is no-one with whom the governess or companion can form alliances; her situation is thus uncomfortable and sometimes precarious. Respected

governesses such as Cassie Jekyll, and those who marry their employers, such as Edith Haslam, are rare. More common are figures such as Miss Bunyan (*Daughters and Sons*), who has been briefly referred to already. Miss Bunyan suffers the fate of many of her kind. She finds herself cruelly treated by the vicious Sabine and only slightly less so by Hetta, and mocked (though not necessarily unkindly) by the Ponsonby children. She is forced into an impossible position and resigns; even the period between the resignation and her departure is unbearable, and she finally can bear no more: ‘... I will eat and drink no more in this house.... Strictly speaking, I should not go without notice, but as you render my remaining impossible, the question does not arise’ (*Daughters and Sons* 61). Her only recourse is to seek refuge with her uncle, the Reverend Chaucer, to whom she acts as unnecessary housekeeper. Fortunately, she is able to resume her position as Muriel’s governess, a less harrowing prospect, in the absence of both Sabine and Hetta, than life as housekeeper in her uncle’s household, where Hetta is now mistress of the house. The last lines show her confidently taking her place at the tea-table, still arousing laughter in Muriel and not understanding why.

Two positions lower in rank and therefore even less enviable than that of governess are those of companion and nurse, or nursemaid; Miss Patmore (Patty) in *Brothers and Sisters*, originally Sophia’s nurse, is held in great affection and some esteem by the Stace children, and still relied upon by Sophia. She is aware that Andrew, Dinah, and Robin suffer at their mother’s hands, a suffering which she shares: Sophia treats all her dependents in the same autocratic manner.

The narrative voice presents her briefly but cogently; after two or three physical details, we learn that: ‘Her chief qualities, almost her only ones, for she was built on simple lines, were a great faithfulness, a great kindness, and a great

curiosity. She looked from father to daughter with all of these' (*Brothers and Sisters* 12, 13). These three qualities engage her in continuing to serve Sophia as companion in adulthood, caring for Sir Andrew in old age, becoming nurse in turn to the Stace children, and knowing all about all of them. Violet Powell sums up Patty, and several of her fellows, fully and accurately, as '[the first of] I. Compton-Burnett's studies of female companions, domestic victims of the moods of their employers and unable to escape from a net woven by love and custom' (Violet Powell 12). After Sir Andrew has made it clear that he does not want Sophia and Christian to marry, Sophia begs Patty not to leave her 'alone with her father' (*Brothers and Sisters* 15). Patty's response, attended by an extended narrative attribution, is wholehearted: "No, I will not forsake you", said Miss Patmore, her eyes on Sophia's beautiful face, and the seeds of her great faithfulness springing in her heart. "I will never desert you while you want me" (15). Patty is party to Sophia's knowledge that Sir Andrew has left an important letter locked in a desk. Her support for Sophia is necessary soon afterwards, when Sir Andrew dies: she must collude with Sophia, who affects to forget about the letter. Neither mentions it. Some years later newcomers arrive in the village; the Lang family consists of Mrs Lang and her adult son and daughter, who are thus one more pair of 'brothers and sisters'; Mrs Lang herself is revealed as Christian's mother, thanks to some old photographs found by Patty. Not long afterwards Christian opens the desk, finds that he is Sir Andrew's illegitimate son, and hence that he and his wife are half-siblings, whereupon he suffers a fatal heart attack. His body is found by Patty, who reads the letter before locking it once again in the desk. She is the only one who knows the cause of the heart attack, the family believing that it was the effort of climbing the stairs; the truth emerges only later. Patty has to endure the vagaries of Sophia's harsh tyrannies, but is consoled by the affection of the children, to whom she is an unfailing support. At the end of the

novel the Staces and some of their friends go off to London to start a new life; fittingly, Patty happily goes with them: ““We shall be off to London, to start afresh. Well, anyhow, it will be a change”. Her voice betrayed the craving of years ... “Well, there is one thing. Moreton Edge will find it very strange to have new people at the Manor”. Patty seemed to end on a note of triumph...’ (272). Readers hope that the word ‘seemed’ does not carry too sinister an implication. Unlike most of the characters of her kind, Patty is an agent in the plot, hiding the secret letter and providing the revealing photographs. That someone in such a subordinate position should be so instrumental in the development of the plot is in itself a narrative irony.

Perhaps the most downtrodden of all Compton-Burnett’s governesses, nurses, and companions is Miss Griffin (*A Family and a Fortune*). She is the companion of the vain and spiteful Matty Seaton, Blanche Gaveston’s sister. Miss Griffin is well treated by the Gaveston family, the kindly Justine taking particular care always to make sure that she feels welcome and comfortable; Dudley is gentlemanly and compassionate in his behaviour to her, taking the opportunity to have a private word when possible. When he and Edgar come down to the lodge to welcome the Seatons and Miss Griffin, Dudley turns away from the group and asks, ‘How are you, Miss Griffin?... I hope you are not hiding feelings of your own on the occasion’ (46). A few minutes later he has occasion to follow Miss Griffin out of the room, and after their chat Miss Griffin turns towards the kitchen ‘with a lighter step’ (52). He explains to Edgar why he had found it necessary to leave the room: ‘... I was saying a kind word to Miss Griffin. They say that a kind word may work wonders; and I saw that something had to work wonders for her; and so I said the word and it did’ (53).

Readers are not long left in doubt as to the necessity of ‘a kind word’ for Miss Griffin; they soon meet an example of her treatment at Matty’s hands. Miss

Griffin responds to Blanche's welcome by saying, 'It is very good of you to come to welcome us,' Matty is quick to put her in her place: 'Mrs. Gaveston came in to see her father and sister, of course'. In case the reader has missed the implication, the narrative voice adds: 'in a tone which said so much more than her words, that it brought a silence' (44). Despite Blanche's placatory interpolations, Matty goes on to criticise the arrangements Miss Griffin and the maid have made, stating quite openly that she would have far greater success: 'I should have known where everything was...' (44).

Throughout the novel Matty's behaviour towards her companion is illustrative of her self-centred cruelty. As Dudley and his two elder nephews approach the lodge to break the news of the separation of Dudley from Maria, and the engagement of Edgar to Maria, they overhear Matty's 'almost strident' (202) tirade as she harangues Miss Griffin: 'Of course I should not be treated like this. You seem to be devoid of any knowledge of civilised life.... I have lost my sister, but her children are my charge, and the woman who is to take her place is my friend....'. When Miss Griffin protests that 'they may not have thought of sending anyone down, Matty starts again: 'Then don't say it; don't dare to say it! Sending anyone down! As if I were some pensioner to be cast a scrap, instead of what I am, the woman who stands to my sister's children in the place of a mother! You have never felt or had any affection, or you could not say such things' (203). Matty recovers herself immediately when the three men arrive.

Miss Griffin endures this kind of treatment every day; even worse is to follow. When Dudley reaches the end of his tether and leaves his family home at night and in the snow, he comes across Miss Griffin, cast out by Matty, without coat or hat. He comes across her 'bent over the bushes in hopeless weeping' (232). In his bitterness

against his brother and his compassion for Miss Griffin, Dudley proposes marriage to her, but she retains enough of her common sense to refuse him. As Dudley takes her to the Middletons she explains what has happened:

“She came back from the house very early and very upset. I could hardly speak to her. Nothing I said was right. And she did not like it if I did not speak. It was no good to try to do anything. Nothing could have made any difference. Mr. Seaton had gone to bed and we were alone. At last she flew into a rage and turned me out of doors. She said it drove her mad to see my face”. Miss Griffin’s voice did not falter. She had felt to her limit and could not go beyond’ (233).

Miss Griffin’s narration of the preceding events strikes readers with its simplicity and clarity, as does the expression of her desires for her future life, when Dudley asks her the following day: ‘I should like to have some peace and some ordinary life like other people before I get old. ... I don’t feel I want to have had nothing: it doesn’t seem right that anyone should go through life like that. You only get your life once...’ (234). When Dudley explains the provision he will make for her, she ‘saw her life open out before her, enclosed, firelit, full of gossip and peace’ (235). The simplicity not only of Miss Griffin’s hopes but also of her words contrast strongly with Matty’s wants and her barbed and subtle implications. In this instance it is fair to say that poetic justice has been visited on Matty and Miss Griffin.

In her portrayal of her women characters Compton-Burnett reveals a profound and wide-ranging understanding of the female predicament in a patriarchal society. She explores many aspects of woman: the professional woman, the serving woman, both dependent and independent women, women who are imprisoned within

marriage. Some of her female characters are flirtatious and manipulative, some are vicious, cruel, amoral; a few might even be described as good. Most are definitely not what they are expected to be. With the hindsight afforded by her post-Great War perspective, she perceives the irony of the discrepancy between what has been considered to be the ideal and what has been achieved.

## Conclusion

The respect Ivy Compton-Burnett enjoyed during her lifetime has become less widespread since her death. Occasionally there has been a flurry of renewed interest but it does not appear to have been sustained. It is against this background that I started, as a long-term admirer, to research her work.

This thesis has explored seven of Ivy Compton-Burnett's novels. In the Introduction, the interwar years were surveyed in order to make clear the profound disasters and developments which took place between the settings of the novels and their writing, thus emphasising the ironic contrasts between the two eras and at the same time the acuity with which Compton-Burnett recognised the *malaise* which became the turmoil she was living through.

The question of the camp dimension of the novels was examined; the conclusion was that, whilst the novels clearly have some camp elements, they do not warrant placement in the genre of camp. Their assignment (or otherwise) to the Modernist Movement, however, is not clear-cut. Unlike some of her fellow women novelists, several of whom were modernist, Compton-Burnett did not immerse herself in any of the important issues of the day, nor in any of the debates into formal experimentation. Yet there is no doubt that her work is deeply political, having as its focus the era in which the beginnings of her own era were starting to be discernible, and which, it can be claimed, she depicted realistically, thus perhaps claiming some consideration as Hapgood and Paxton's hybrid; moreover, her diction was amongst those which were considered innovatory. It is perhaps fair to say that Ivy Compton-Burnett trod her own version of the modernist path.

The thesis has focused on the contribution of the narrative voice to Compton-Burnett's diction. Part One has examined various aspects of her diction, including many of her narratological strategies: amongst them, introductory descriptions of character and setting, narrative interpolations, the presentation of speech and thought, extended attributions of speaking, and the use of the chorus in her work.

Compton-Burnett's perceived lack of description of character and setting has been heavily but unjustifiably criticised. Whilst it is true that she does not provide as much detail as do her predecessors and many of her contemporaries, it has been demonstrated that what she does offer uses carefully selected, value-laden vocabulary and devices such as alliteration and repetition to produce the necessary impact on the reader. S/he has given sufficient salient details to enable the reader not only to envisage an impression of physical appearance but also to infer possible characteristics, which emerge during the course of the novel. In order to do this, the reader has had to exercise his/her deductive powers to the full. Thus, for the careful reader, Compton-Burnett's introductory descriptions supply more, and more pertinent, information than many have claimed.

Mantel has pointed out that Compton-Burnett's descriptions 'are done to a formula which has meaning in itself' (x). The 'formula' usually includes genetic details, which suggest resemblances to parents and grandparents and therefore to ancestry. Her descriptions of setting, similarly brief, again provide specific details from which general information can be gleaned. The details of character and setting taken together offer information about physical appearance, both of face and figure, of the main players; about character traits and the family hierarchy, and about their houses and grounds. From the information given inferences may be drawn as to the character and lives of her protagonists (the families), and the financial situation in

which they find themselves. Compton-Burnett's narrative interpolations, ranging from short sentences to an occasional long paragraph, are all significant, and none is longer than it need be. Sometimes an interpolation is as witty as the dialogue; sometimes, however, it is compassionate or poignant. Again, interpolations are heavy with implication, taxing the reader's concentration, as do the extended speech attributions. Ranging from simple adverbs to narrative and descriptive clauses, these extended attributions, which are a particularly noteworthy feature of Compton-Burnett's diction, succeed in delivering considerable quantities not only of wit, but also of insights into character, mood, relationships, and narrative sequence without which even the closest of readers might find him/herself lost.

Compton-Burnett's determination to retain, as far as possible, the distance between narrator and what is narrated results in a first impression of an unnavigable sea of dialogue. There are indeed a great many utterances which are directly reported or reported only by 'said'. However, Compton-Burnett's other reporting verbs, by their very infrequency, engage readers' attention. We almost hear Sabine's and Hetta's hisses and Sabine's screams and shrieks, we cringe when we hear Dulcia's whispers, and we listen particularly closely to the murmurs and mutters.

The chorus enables readers to witness characters and action from another angle, an outside or possibly just a marginalised angle, his or her voice also perhaps significantly reported or accompanied by an extended attribution. The use of all of the above techniques enables Compton-Burnett to maintain narratorial distance; the preponderance of the dialogue causes readers to 'listen' to a greater extent than usual when reading. Sibyl's flirtatious tone when speaking to her father, Nance's much cooler one—both suggested by the dialogue—almost rise from the page. When they are supplemented by frequent interpolations and implicatory attributions which

enhance the reader's 'listening' experience, there can be no justification for the complaint of this 'unreadable' novelist. Dialogue has been prevalent, but narrative voice has not been silent: such is the skill, subtlety, and variety of narrative input that it cannot be dismissed, as has frequently been the case.

In Part Two discussion of the thesis has focused on how the effect of Compton-Burnett's diction enhances her writing, the better to clarify and strengthen what she has to say. Her project in these seven novels has been to satirise the clergy and the church, specifically the Church of England, and to demonstrate that to achieve the Christian ideal of wife and mother is impossible. She has sought also to uncover the lassitude of the upper middle class and its consequent failure to recognise the erosion of its class. Five of these seven novels were published during the nineteen thirties, an era during which the British governing class sought to appease its enemies and go on as before, believing in its own superiority. Compton-Burnett's work reflects the arrogance of this attitude. Furthermore, she has challenged received notions of gender. In this last regard, not only has she subverted the accepted ideal of the patriarchy by creating nothing other than imperfect or divergent models, she has shown women, supposedly inferior to men, as capable of reasoning and decision-making, and of living and prospering independently as professionals. In doing so, she has brought to light the distressing plight of unmarried upper middle-class women without means of support, brought up with 'accomplishments' but without skills, and therefore condemned to live pitiable lives as second-class citizens. She has boldly suggested that the so-called maternal instinct is not necessarily innate in all women. Perhaps even more radically, she has examined gender roles and proposed alternative ways of living, in lesbian partnerships, in sibling relationships, or in more than one

relationship during the course of a lifetime, depending on circumstance and inclination.

In our personal lives today, some of Compton-Burnett's variant life-styles may be said to be almost in the mainstream. As far as our political lives are concerned, we too are faced with both internal and external threats and with migrating populations. Whilst we may not admire the inertia of Compton-Burnett's patriarchs, who were faced with some of the same threats, we perceive their situation and can understand their disinclination to take action.

However, amidst all the arrogance, the cruelty, the selfishness, the spite, she makes her readers laugh, and repeatedly. We should enjoy the fun, before penetrating the depths.

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