

## Love and courtship in mid-twentieth-century England

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## LOVE AND COURTSHIP IN MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY ENGLAND

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# LOVE AND COURTSHIP IN MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY ENGLAND\*

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ABSTRACT. *This article contributes to the on-going study of modern affective life by exploring the ways in which love was understood, invoked, and deployed within heterosexual courtships. ‘Love’ itself is approached as a highly mutable and flexible concept whose meanings and uses are contingent upon historical moment, gender, status, and generation. Whilst the article does not claim to offer a comprehensive history of love across the central years of the twentieth century, it suggests that some of the everyday meanings and uses of that emotion can be illuminated through consideration of this particular aspect of social life. Rather than placing discursive constructions centre stage, the article uses life history material to effect an analysis embedded in everyday practices. Courtship itself is understood as a transitional stage between youth and adulthood: a life stage during which the meanings and uses of ‘love’ were implicitly or explicitly confronted, where gender relationships were potentially unstable, and where aspiration and desire could conflict in the making of the self. Courtship therefore constituted an important rite of passage which could provide an opportunity to perform, reject, and refine new roles and responsibilities, whilst negotiating future status and identity. The article explores the power dynamics which underlined romantic encounters, but argues that through their everyday practice young women exercised real, if bounded, agency within this sphere of social life.*

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## I

In 1955 the anthropologist, Geoffrey Gorer, published his survey of English society and attitudes, *Exploring English character*. His method, detailed questionnaire responses received from over 10,000 readers of the *People* newspaper, allowed him to explore many areas of English life from ‘people and homes’ through ‘growing up’ and ‘ideas about sex’ to ‘religion and other beliefs’. He also asked a series of questions about love. ‘Slightly more than three-quarters of the total English population and nearly 90 per cent of the married, consider they have been “really in love”’, he asserted, continuing ‘the meaning of this phrase is far from

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precise ... but whatever the understanding the English give to it, it does represent an important emotional event in the lives of the greater part of the community.<sup>1</sup> Yet love, and particularly its manifestation in everyday language and social practice, has attracted only sporadic attention from historians of twentieth-century England. Whilst a vibrant and theoretically sophisticated literature on *sexual* practice and discourse has long been established, the historicization of love has only far more recently been attempted.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, despite the difficulties historians face in accessing intimate physical experiences, we seem to know far more about English sexual lives than about how men and women contracted, negotiated, and maintained emotional intimacies prior to marriage, within the institution itself, and beyond its social and moral parameters.<sup>3</sup>

Recent historical work on love has tended to focus upon dominant constructions and representations producing welcome, if incomplete, intellectual and cultural histories of the emotion.<sup>4</sup> For example, in her book on interwar Britain, *Europe in love*, Luisa Passerini rather unconvincingly suggests an inter-relationship between the idea of Europe and a European discourse of love.<sup>5</sup> Passerini's ongoing collaborative project further pursues the connections between European identity and ideas of romantic love.<sup>6</sup> The first major historical work to address love across twentieth-century Britain, Marcus Collins's *Modern love: an intimate history of men and women in twentieth-century Britain*, is also located largely within the intellectual history tradition.<sup>7</sup> In a comprehensive survey of discursive constructions, *Modern love* charts the apparent rise and fall of 'mutuality' within modern heterosexual relationships. However, Collins himself admits the limited impact of theories of love founded upon mutual respect and equality, stating that mutuality

<sup>1</sup> G. Gorer, *Exploring English character* (London, 1955), p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Hera Cook, *The long sexual revolution: women, sex, and contraception in England, 1800–1975* (Oxford, 2004), and Lesley Hall, *Sex, gender and social change in Britain since 1880* (Basingstoke, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> This article is not primarily concerned with sex.

<sup>4</sup> It is not my intention here to discuss in detail the development of the history of emotions more broadly as this is surveyed elsewhere. For a comprehensive examination of theories of emotions and an introduction to his own concept of 'emotives' see William M. Reddy, *The navigation of feeling: a framework for the history of emotions* (Cambridge, 2001). For a survey which restricts itself to historical works see Joanna Bourke, 'Fear and anxiety: writing about emotion in modern history', *History Workshop Journal*, 55 (2003), pp. 111–33. Recent works on the modern British context include Martin Francis's study of masculine emotional culture, 'Tears, tantrums, and bared teeth: the emotional economy of three Conservative prime ministers, 1951–1963', *Journal of British Studies*, 41 (2000), pp. 354–87, and Michael Roper's methodological intervention, 'Slipping out of view: subjectivity and emotion in gender history', *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (2005), pp. 57–72.

<sup>5</sup> Luisa Passerini, *Europe in love, love in Europe: imagination and politics between the wars* (London, 1999). Although methodologically intriguing, the central weakness of this book is, in fact, its inability coherently to tie two intellectual histories together convincingly.

<sup>6</sup> L. Passerini, 'Europe of love: re-centring intercultural affairs', *European Review of History*, 11 (2004), pp. 171–84.

<sup>7</sup> Marcus Collins, *Modern love: an intimate history of men and women in twentieth-century Britain* (London, 2003). Twentieth-century love has, of course, been addressed by those working beyond the discipline of history. See, for example, Anthony Giddens, *The transformation of intimacy: sexuality, love and eroticism in modern societies* (Cambridge, 1992).

‘constituted a middle class revolt against middle-class mores’.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, attention to the ‘relative “throw”’ of this discourse, allied to detailed analysis of everyday practice, suggests that Collins’s model of mutuality was simply one of a number of competing constructions of love.<sup>9</sup> As this article will demonstrate, mutuality cannot therefore assume prime conceptual status within the historiography of this field.

Whilst the intellectual history of love continues to grow we still lack a thoroughgoing analysis of the ways in which love was understood, invoked, and deployed ‘in the round’ of everyday life.<sup>10</sup> Within existing accounts representation is privileged over narrated experience and the complex dialogue between ideals of love and individual behaviour surprisingly under-researched. As Linda Pollock observes, in a methodologically suggestive piece on early modern anger, ‘No amount of analysis of emotional culture itself will reveal the lived experience of emotions and their function in everyday situations.’<sup>11</sup> Michael Roper has recently offered an important critique of cultural approaches to gender arguing for ‘the significance of the material, of bodily experiences, and of the practices of daily life in which emotional relations are embedded’.<sup>12</sup> My aim in this article is to offer a study of everyday courtship practices which contributes further to the embedded study of affective life. The article does not claim to offer a comprehensive history of love across the central years of the twentieth century, nor indeed does it discuss sexual practice at length. Instead it draws upon life history sources to explore the contested meanings of love within a particular aspect of social life. Informed by the work of sociologists, anthropologists, and historians of emotion, ‘love’ is understood as a highly mutable concept whose very meanings are contingent upon historical moment, gender, status, and generation. As Stevi Jackson has argued, ‘Love cannot be treated as if it has an existence independent of the social and cultural context within which it is experienced.’<sup>13</sup> Rather it is shaped, deployed, invoked, and ultimately subjectively ‘felt’ by individuals in dialogue with their material and discursive worlds: within a particular historical moment the meaning and uses of love can vary greatly.

<sup>8</sup> Collins, *Modern love*, p. 9. Collins draws largely upon political and institutional sources with a principal focus upon ‘the bourgeoisie and its bohemian fringe’.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Mandler argues that cultural historians must attend to the ‘relative “throw”’ of any discourse in assessing its significance in his controversial article, ‘The problem with cultural history’, *Cultural and Social History*, 1 (2004), pp. 94–117, at p. 96. Mandler also identifies the status and significance of different kinds of texts and the construction of meaning as key methodological problems within the field.

<sup>10</sup> Of course literary, philosophical, and sociological explorations of love abound. See for example, Roland Barthes, *A lover’s discourse: fragments* (London, 2002); Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *The normal chaos of love* (London, 1995); Julia Kristeva, *Tales of love* (New York, 1987); Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey, eds., *Romance revisited* (London, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Linda A. Pollock, ‘Anger and the negotiation of relationships in early modern England’, *Historical Journal*, 47 (2004), pp. 567–90, at p. 571.

<sup>12</sup> Roper, ‘Slipping out of view’, p. 69. See also his ‘Between manliness and masculinity: the “war generation” and the psychology of fear in Britain, 1914–1950’, *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (2005), pp. 343–62.

<sup>13</sup> S. Jackson, *Heterosexuality in question* (London, 1999), p. 96.

Youthful heterosexual relationships prior to, but not *necessarily* resulting in, marriage are the central focus of this article. For the sake of linguistic convenience these are referred to as courtships, although this naming is not unproblematic, a discussion which will be opened up shortly.<sup>14</sup> My contention, nonetheless, is that within the life cycle of the majority of heterosexual young men and women, across the mid-twentieth century, we can observe a formative stage when emotional attachments were made, or were expected to be made, and developed. This was a point at which the meanings and uses of 'love' were implicitly or explicitly confronted, where gender relationships were potentially unstable, and where desire could conflict with pragmatism in the making of the self and of the future. Courtship, within the context of near universal marriage, therefore constituted an important rite of passage which offered bounded opportunities to perform and refine new gender roles, whilst simultaneously permitting the re-negotiation of social status and identity. The choices made, or not made, in this period framed the emotional and material context of adulthood. The historical study of courtship can therefore shed new light on key categories of historical understanding such as gender, generation, and social status, through analysis of the power dynamics at play in partner selection within the context of the couple, the family, and the community beyond.

Yet twentieth-century courtship has received little systematic attention in its own right as an everyday practice.<sup>15</sup> Whilst the topic has attracted the limited attentions of historians working more broadly on women, work, and family, John Gillis's ambitious study, *For better, for worse: British marriages, 1600 to the present*, remains the only book length study consistently to take modern courtship practice seriously.<sup>16</sup> However, even this work largely fails to explore the ways in which men and women subjectively understood courtship practice and its relationship to the meanings and uses of love, focusing instead upon ritual and custom. More recently Cas Wouters's *Female emancipation in the West, 1890–2000* has surveyed the

<sup>14</sup> The language used to describe emotional intimacies prior to marriage is contested as the second section of this article will demonstrate.

<sup>15</sup> Historians of other periods have, however, explored courtship practices in Britain. See for example, Richard Adair's *Courtship, illegitimacy and marriage in early modern England* (Manchester, 1996) and Diana O'Hara's *Courtship and constraint: rethinking the making of marriage in Tudor England* (Manchester, 2002). Both of these monographs explore courtship negotiations in the early modern period, whilst Ginger S. Frost's *Broken promises: courtship, class and gender in Victorian England* (Charlottesville, 1995) explores breach of promise cases in the nineteenth century.

<sup>16</sup> John Gillis, *For better, for worse: British marriages, 1600 to the present* (Oxford, 1985). See also Judy Giles, *Women, identity and private life in Britain, 1900–1950* (Basingstoke, 1995), pp. 49–63; Natalie Higgins, 'The changing expectations and realities of marriage in the English working class, 1920–1960' (D.Phil. thesis, Cambridge, 2002), pp. 86–121; Claire Langhamer, *Women's leisure in England, 1920–1960* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 113–132; Elizabeth Roberts, *A woman's place: an oral history of working-class women, 1890–1940* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 72–80; Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and families: an oral history, 1940–1970* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 59–75; Derek Thompson, 'Courtship and marriage in Preston between the wars', *Oral History*, 3 (1975); Selina Todd, *Young women, work, and family in England, 1918–1950* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 195–224.

advice literature which framed courtship behaviour in the West, but this book largely fails to examine the extent to which such advice was adopted.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast, this article combines attention to courtship practices with a consideration of the subjective understandings which can be accessed through the life history method. In addition to a range of social survey material generated across the period, this article employs evidence collected by the pioneering British social investigative organization Mass-Observation.<sup>18</sup> Mass-Observation was established in 1937 with the avowed aim of constructing ‘an anthropology of ourselves’ and, in its first phase, generated material into the 1950s. Its approach was eclectic but included observational research, the solicitation of diaries, and the collection of responses to a monthly ‘directive’: a series of open-ended questions on particular topics sent by the organization to a panel of volunteers. A fascination with the minutiae of everyday life was perhaps Mass-Observation’s defining feature and, combined with a method which guaranteed a persistent strand of subjectivity, it is arguably the pre-eminent archive for the reflexive study of social life in mid-century Britain.<sup>19</sup> In 1981 the directive system was revived and a ‘new’ Mass-Observation archive emerged which continues to generate life history material up to the present. Here I draw upon ‘old’ and ‘new’ Mass-Observation to explore both historically sited material and recently solicited memory texts. Particular use is made of the summer 2001 directive on ‘courting and dating’, commissioned specifically for this project, which generated approximately 50 replies from men and 140 from women. The directive posed questions around the terminology of courtship, the meaning of love, ideal partners, courtship etiquette, and sexual experiences. Correspondents were asked to write on courtship across their life span. As is well documented, Mass-Observation does not offer the historian a ‘representative sample’; the particularities of its class and gender reach negate any such claim.<sup>20</sup> Nor, of course, can it offer unmediated or unproblematic access to everyday experience and emotion. Discussions of love, within the 2001 replies, are framed by the overarching subject ‘courting and dating’ and therefore reflect the process of solicitation. Nonetheless, the self-reflection demanded of the volunteer panel generated, and continues to generate, material which is richly autobiographical and threaded through with subjective understandings of social

<sup>17</sup> Cas Wouters, *Female emancipation in the West, 1890–2000* (London, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> On the history of Mass-Observation see Nick Hubble, *Mass Observation and everyday life: culture, history, theory* (London, 2005); Tom Jeffrey, ‘Mass-Observation, a short history’, *Mass-Observation Archive Occasional Paper*, 10 (1999); Tony Kushner, *We Europeans? Mass-Observation, ‘race’, and British identity in twentieth-century Britain* (Aldershot, 2004). An introduction to Mass-Observation with a particular focus on the new project is provided by Dorothy Sheridan, David Bloome, and Brian Street in *Writing ourselves: Mass-Observation and literacy practices* (Cresskill, NJ, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of the criticisms made of Mass-Observation’s methods over time and a helpful account of the archive’s research potential see Kushner’s *We Europeans?*, pp. 8–28. Kushner himself employs Mass-Observation material ‘undefensively’, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of Mass-Observation’s ‘representative ness’ and a suggestion that the Archive offers access to ‘representative experience’, see Jenny Shaw, ‘Intellectual property, representative experience and Mass-Observation’, *Mass-Observation Occasional Paper*, 9 (1998).

worlds. Mass-Observation material allows for an interrogation of the dialectical relationship between practice and prescription within individual lives as narrated at a particular moment in time. It offers access to the ways in which historical actors adapted, utilized, or disregarded discursive constructions within their own spheres of existence. For these reasons Mass-Observation provides distinctive and dynamic material for the study of courtship practice and its relationship to love.

## II

The period 1930 to 1970 could be described as a golden age of courtship. It has certainly been characterized as a golden age of marriage: 'the only age, of the near universal, stable, long-lasting marriage, often considered the normality from which we have since departed' as Pat Thane has put it.<sup>21</sup> Across mid-century England marriage, at ever younger ages, grew in popularity before a precipitous decline of the institution thereafter. In the period 1931 to 1935 the first marriage rate per 1,000 single women aged over 15 was 57.3 and for men it was 62.6; by 1936 to 1940 it was 73.3 and 78.7 respectively; and by 1966 to 1970 it was 94.2 for women and 82.1 for men. In 1981 to 1985 it dropped to 59.9 for women and 48.1 for men.<sup>22</sup> The mean age at first marriage for men dropped from 27.3 in 1931 to 24.6 in 1971 and for women it dropped from 25.4 in 1931 to 22.6 in 1971.<sup>23</sup> Class differences are of course apparent within these general trends. Chiefly there was a tendency for the working classes to marry younger than their middle-class counterparts, a phenomenon related to their more rapid progression through education and training to adult economic status. Yet across social groups the age at first marriage began to rise after 1971. Historians have pointed to broad changes in the sex ratio, effected chiefly through the decline of male migration, as a partial explanation for the rising incidence of marriage, although socio-economic factors should not be underplayed.<sup>24</sup> The declining age at first marriage can, at least partially, be explained by economic factors such as young people's rising employment opportunities and earnings which 'eroded the financial need for long courtships'.<sup>25</sup> Consideration of key shifts in the methods by which emotional attachments were effected, the meanings attached to 'love', and shifting aspirations for married life offer additional ways of understanding and contextualizing this distinctive demographic phenomenon.

Constructions of marriage were certainly changing within this period and Collins is right to highlight mutuality as one aspect of this discursive shift. The

<sup>21</sup> Pat Thane, 'Family life and "normality" in post-war British culture', in R. Bessel and D. Schumann, eds., *Life after death: approaches to a cultural and social history of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 198.

<sup>22</sup> D. A. Coleman, 'Population and family', in A. H. Halsey, ed., *Twentieth-century British social trends* (London, 2000), pp. 56–7.

<sup>23</sup> Jane Lewis, *The end of marriage? Individualism and intimate relations* (Cheltenham, 2001), p. 30.

<sup>24</sup> D. A. Coleman, 'Population', in A. H. Halsey, ed., *British social trends since 1900* (London, 1988), p. 70.

<sup>25</sup> Todd, *Young women*, p. 222.

‘companionate’ marriage, founded upon emotional and sexual satisfaction, and located within an increasingly privatized home, emerged as an aspiration for some in the interwar years. Indeed, a self-consciously ‘modern’ representation of conjugality which fused romance, material security, and self-development was perhaps more apparent in the films, novels, and magazines of 1930s England than it was two decades later. Moreover, the desire of young women, in particular, for a life different to that of their mothers found expression in leisure and consumption choices, the decline of domestic service as an occupation, the limitation of family size, and the quest for ‘a home of one’s own’.<sup>26</sup> Whilst the home-centred society which post-1945 commentators identified as a characteristic of their time had its roots in the years before the Second World War, post-war affluence enabled modern domesticity to be actualized.<sup>27</sup>

Within this context, an expectation of marriage framed youthful visions of the future and underlined leisure experiences and social life. As one *Mass-Observer* affirmed, ‘In the 1950s and 1960s ... life was organized in twos once you were old enough to go to Saturday hops, or the cinema, with a member of the opposite sex. Courting was the “normal” state from say, 16, onward.’<sup>28</sup> The primacy of courtship within young adulthood was certainly picked up by a number of social investigators of the period, becoming more central to youth culture as the period progressed. Commenting on her 1950s study of London, Nottingham, and Oxfordshire, Pearl Jephcott observed that courting superseded all other forms of leisure as ‘all other activities must give way’.<sup>29</sup> Working-class girls in particular were

expected to make a satisfactory marriage and to be reasonably quick about it. In Robin Wood, for example, from ‘having a boy’ to ‘going steady’, and from ‘going steady’ to ‘getting married’, were the proper steps for any dutiful daughter to take in her teens and to have completed by her early twenties. A girl who was sufficiently attractive and proper-spirited to proceed by this pattern, brought credit to all.<sup>30</sup>

The overriding importance of marriage choices for girls, particularly working-class girls, in the face of a construction of marriage as *the* career for them gave them a particular responsibility for courtship. It also encouraged a measure of agency, although this was an agency bounded by gendered notions of appropriate intimate behaviour.

Marriage was the ‘normal’ state for adults in mid-century England and because of this courtship was a significant rite of passage. Yet the language of courtship was unstable and contested, contingent upon a range of factors including generation,

<sup>26</sup> Judy Giles, ‘A home of one’s own: women and domesticity in England, 1918–1950’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 16 (1993), pp. 239–53.

<sup>27</sup> Claire Langhamer, ‘The meanings of home in postwar Britain’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40 (2005), pp. 341–62.

<sup>28</sup> *Mass-Observation Archive* (hereafter M-O A), Summer 2001 directive, ‘Courting and dating’, women no. W633, born 1942.

<sup>29</sup> Pearl Jephcott, *Some young people* (London, 1954), p. 66.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

geographical location, social background, and gender. As Diana Leonard observed in her study of marriage and courtship in late 1960s Swansea, ‘there is a lack of agreed terminology for the early stages of courtship which makes it difficult to establish the history of the individual, or of the particular couple’s relationship ... There is certainly no formalized, named stage corresponding to American “dating”.’<sup>31</sup> When, in 2001, Mass-Observation asked its panel of volunteer writers for accounts of ‘courting and dating’ the contingency of the naming of this experience was sharply evident. When asked specifically to consider the question, ‘What does the word “courtship” mean to you?’, Mass-Observation’s panel were certain that the term was as outmoded as the practice it described. Whilst some rejected the word entirely as ‘an eighteenth century word’, ‘Victorian’, ‘very old-fashioned’, ‘a slightly cringe making word’, the majority used it to describe experiences specifically rooted in the years before the 1960s and 1970s. Some suggested that the word had a regional flavour: “‘Are you courting lass?’” is the type of question once asked by elderly relatives of a young person especially in the north in gritty films starring people like Gracie Fields or George Formby.’<sup>32</sup> Others claimed that it had class connotations: ‘In my family (perhaps feeling above their station) the word was either old-fashioned or lower class. It was also north country.’<sup>33</sup> Many linked the term to the public performance of attachment: ‘I suppose the word “courtship” has gone out of favour because the practice is now all but defunct. People do not “walk out” with their intended any more, displaying their choice for public and family approval.’<sup>34</sup> Elsewhere, courtship, as a formal, idealized, cinematic model did not speak to individual life narratives:

What does the word courtship mean to me? Well I think not very much except in films like those in my youth of Jeanette Macdonald and Nelson Eddy. I think courtship means something very polite and formal whereas as working girls we mostly got somebody of similar ilk where we spent a certain amount of time lurking on badly lit corners and usually on about the second meeting we found we had nothing in common and it fizzled out. I don’t remember a single person of my acquaintance being courted with flowers or chocolates. I think we would have felt uneasy if they had done so – where would they have got the money from!<sup>35</sup>

The language of courtship was consistently cut through by class and gender. Everyday usage of the verb, to court, was characteristically working class; the noun, courtship, simultaneously spoke to more middle-class, but outdated, rituals. Gender differences in the use of these terms were significant. Women were more likely to claim the language of courting for more than one relationship; men tended to reserve this language to describe only relationships that ended in

<sup>31</sup> Diana Leonard, *Sex and generation: a study of courtship and weddings* (London, 1980), p. 70.

<sup>32</sup> M-O A, ‘Courting and dating’, women no. M1979, born 1938.

<sup>33</sup> M-O A, ‘Courting and dating’, women no. M2290, born 1929.

<sup>34</sup> M-O A, ‘Courting and dating’, men no. W2322, born 1944.

<sup>35</sup> M-O A, ‘Courting and dating’, women no. C2570, born 1921.

marriage. Gillis suggests that men ‘tended to marry the first woman they were seriously attracted to’.<sup>36</sup> Certainly physical appearance looms much larger in retrospective accounts of partner selection narrated by men than in those offered by women. The men interviewed by Natalie Higgins for her study of mid-century Hull and Birmingham were far more likely to employ a ‘falling in love’ device as the pivot around which to explain spouse selection, than were her more pragmatic female interviewees.<sup>37</sup> In this way, life history evidence suggests that courtship constituted a more general life cycle stage for women than for men, and this reflects the relative importance for the former of finding a partner across this period. Where marriage remained a woman’s primary goal, courtship was less tied to a particular individual and instead became a state of being. Gender differences in the willingness to deploy the language of courtship also reflect the extent to which gendered notions of independence and respectability framed a tension between casualness and commitment. Naming a relationship as a courtship presented real benefits for women, for example, an easing of parental control might ensue.<sup>38</sup> It also partially legitimized degrees of sexual intimacy which the appellation ‘casual’ did not.

Other terms used were similarly contentious although on the basis of generation and national identity rather than gender and social class. ‘Dating’ named the experiences of some in the post-war years whilst others ‘never used the Americanism “dating”’; the very concept was foreign to us’.<sup>39</sup> Indeed Beth Bailey has shown that ‘dating’ had replaced ‘calling’ as the primary method of courtship in the United States by the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> A whole range of alternative terms were suggested by the Mass-Observation panel including ‘stepping out’, ‘walking out’, and ‘going out’: all terms which reflected the extent to which intimacy was developed in public and increasingly performed within the parameters of developing leisure opportunities. Yet by far the most common response regarded the difficulties inherent in naming everyday practices, difficulties which themselves suggest a potential instability and re-working of established models within the intimate personal relations of youth across the central years of the twentieth century.

### III

‘Dancing is one of the recognized ways, particularly now that churchgoing has so declined, in which boys and girls expect to find their future partner’, asserted Jephcott in 1942.<sup>41</sup> Prior to the war, the Tower Ballroom in Blackpool was described by Mass-Observation as a venue within which “‘picking-up” and

<sup>36</sup> Gillis, *For better, for worse*, p. 287.

<sup>37</sup> Higgins, ‘The changing expectations and realities of marriage’, p. 102.

<sup>38</sup> On the restrictive potential of courtships see Langhamer, *Women’s leisure*, p. 128.

<sup>39</sup> M-O A, ‘Courting and dating’, men no. R2065, born 1916.

<sup>40</sup> Beth Bailey, *From front porch to back seat* (Baltimore, 1988).

<sup>41</sup> Pearl Jephcott, *Girls growing up* (London, 1942), p. 123.

“getting-off” are accepted as normal behaviour’.<sup>42</sup> A 1959 survey by the Population Investigation Committee in collaboration with Gallup found that the dance hall was ‘the most popular place for meeting one’s life partner: over a quarter of couples had met in this way’.<sup>43</sup> In analysing this data Pierce concluded that the dance hall was the ‘number one’ marriage market.<sup>44</sup> Within the middle years of the twentieth century commercial leisure venues increasingly functioned as the primary arenas for ‘picking up’. The promise of romantic meetings was a key element in the attraction of particular leisure activities; the expansion of commercial, youth orientated, leisure provided more scope for romantic encounters. As Eva Illouz has observed, leisure was ‘naturally’ romantic.<sup>45</sup> Romance, leisure, commodities, and youth became increasingly entwined within this period and as young people’s earning capacity grew they were particularly well placed to exploit these intersections.

Although increasingly dominant as a courtship arena as the period progressed dancing was not, of course, the only commercial opportunity for this mixing of the sexes. Visits to the cinema could also be a source of potential partners, as well as a significant arena for developing courtship activity away from parental supervision. In 1960 *The Times* reported that

A Coventry cinema manager, Mr. John King, who claims that teenage girls use his cinema – the Standard – as a meeting place to look for boyfriends, has banned girls between 13 and 18 permanently from it. He said to-day that the ban did not apply to boys, who behaved themselves when the girls were not there to ‘spur them on’.<sup>46</sup>

As this story demonstrates, women could adopt a pro-active role within the rituals of courtship and I will discuss women’s instrumentality again shortly. Films themselves exploited the theme of love and romance, although they could actively discourage attachments by offering visions of romantic behaviour which contrasted too sharply with everyday life. In their 1951 study *English life and leisure* Rowntree and Lavers quoted one twenty-one-year-old shop girl who remarked ‘Marry and have kids you don’t want, and live in a poky house, and not have any nice clothes? Not me! Marrying would be all right if it was the way they do it in the pictures, but real life isn’t like that.’<sup>47</sup> An eighteen-year-old bank clerk observed that ‘It [the cinema] has made me despise boys of about my own age, with whom I have been out. After seeing the polished lover on the screen it is rather disillusioning to be kissed by a clumsy inexperienced boy. I have tried not to feel like that about them, but I still find I would rather go out with an older man than a young boy.’<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, cinemas on the whole did provide cheap and

<sup>42</sup> Gary Cross, ed., *Worktowners at Blackpool: Mass-Observation and popular leisure in the 1930s* (London, 1990), p. 174.

<sup>43</sup> Rachel M. Pierce, ‘Marriage in the fifties’, *Sociological Review*, n.s. 11 (1963), p. 219. <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> E. Illouz, *Consuming the romantic utopia: love and the cultural contradictions of capitalism* (Berkeley, CA, 1997), p. 37.

<sup>46</sup> *The Times*, 1 Feb. 1960, p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> B. Seebohn Rowntree and G. R. Lavers, *English life and leisure: a social survey* (London, 1951), p. 249.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

accessible opportunities to meet members of the opposite sex, without the additional costs of dress and appearance and a less easily acquired level of dancing talent.

The cinema and dance hall were dominant arenas for romantic encounters throughout this period, although the cinema in particular was in decline by the 1960s and 1970s as television spread and pub usage increased amongst the young. Beyond these two commercial giants, however, we can see some measured change over time in meeting places and can identify some degree of social segregation in practice. In the pre-war years middle-class youths were more likely to find partners via family, church, societies, clubs, and the workplace. Into the post-war years universities increasingly operated as marriage markets. Judith Hubback found that 36 per cent of the *Wives who went to college* that she interviewed in the 1950s met their husbands at university.<sup>49</sup> In addition to workplace and commercial leisure arenas, 1930s working-class youths used less formal activities such as the evening walk to gain introductions. In this context particular spaces, urban and rural, gained a semi-official designation as arenas within which young men and women could parade and make introductions. In Manchester the Sunday evening 'monkey walk' provided young people with an opportunity for sexual display and performance; a similar function was performed in Stoke-on-Trent by 'monkey-running'. Traditional parades of this nature were untenable during the war and seem to have largely died out by the late 1940s in the face of increased traffic and youthful affluence.<sup>50</sup> In fact, as Todd has demonstrated, the erosion of sex segregation within the workforce during and after the war ensured that working-class men and women became increasingly likely to meet future spouses in their work environment 'away from watchful parental eyes'.<sup>51</sup> Despite this, young people continued to make creative use of leisure developments to solicit romantic meetings. The King George's Jubilee Trust survey, conducted between 1950 and 1952, observed that even cycling could be used as a way of picking up men as 'a cycle was regarded as essential for making encounters, since it is quite in order to pick up boys if one is on a bike – an altogether different matter from going after them on foot'.<sup>52</sup> The response of one Mass-Observer to the 2001 directive demonstrated that pretty much any arena was worth pursuing for boys: 'My girlfriends and I used to go out looking for boys, at the cinema, the roller skating rink, and on the pier at Southend-On-Sea.'<sup>53</sup>

Beyond the realm of everyday social and work life those seeking romantic introductions could also make recourse to a range of publications, organizations,

<sup>49</sup> Judith Hubback, *Wives who went to college* (London, 1957), p. 25.

<sup>50</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the monkey walk in interwar Salford and Manchester see Andrew Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty: working-class culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900–1939* (Buckingham, 1992), pp. 102–8. On 'monkey-running' in Stoke-on-Trent see Jacqueline Sarsby, *Missuses and mouldrunners: an oral history of women pottery workers at work and at home* (Milton Keynes, 1988), pp. 71–5.

<sup>51</sup> Todd, *Young women*, pp. 154–6.

<sup>52</sup> Jephcott, *Some young people*, p. 58.

<sup>53</sup> M-O A, 'Courting and dating', women no. P1282, born 1938.

and clubs explicitly dedicated to matchmaking and implicitly socially segregated. As Harry Cocks has demonstrated, ‘lonely hearts’ advertisements were well established by the start of our period, if prone to periodic press and occasionally legal investigation.<sup>54</sup> In mid-twentieth-century England a whole range of correspondence clubs, friendship circles, and introduction agencies operated. For those intent on marriage, advertisements could be placed in publications such as the *Matrimonial Post and Fashionable Advertiser*. Correspondence clubs such as the Golden Circle Club, the Two-ways Contact Club, the Victory Correspondence Club (founded in 1942), and Brighton’s Happy Circle provided ‘select’ lists of fellow members’ addresses for a fee of around a pound and claimed remarkable success. As a Miss M. V. C. of London apparently attested in 1950, ‘I became a member of the Victory Club about a month back, I myself have had in this short time one suggestion of marriage, and also an offer of marriage.’<sup>55</sup> The most widely known marriage bureau, Heather Jenner’s of Bond Street, was established in 1939 and catered for a predominantly middle-class and upper-class clientele, advertising its services in theatre programmes, magazines, and newspapers. Other clubs catered for particular sections of the population. For example, the Catholic Introductions Bureau was cited by one *Mass-Observer* who used it in the 1950s.<sup>56</sup> Another recalled using the Inter-Varsity Club which ‘advertised itself as a social club for young professional people. However, to all intents and purposes, it operated as a marriage bureau for educated and/or intelligent people. The vast majority of the members were single when they joined and tended to belong until they met, and married, someone from the club whereupon they would drift away.’<sup>57</sup>

The extent to which romantic encounters were mediated by social class is, indeed, striking across the period. Social surveys repeatedly suggest that commercial arenas, the street, and, in the post-war years, pub and coffee bar, were of far more importance to working-class couples than to the middle classes, amongst whom introductions via the home, workplace, educational establishment, or clubs predominated. Derek Thomson’s study of courtship in interwar Preston demonstrates that segregation according to social status and religion was practised across a range of meeting places including dance halls and pubs.<sup>58</sup> His oral evidence suggests that working-class courtship parades, in Preston called ‘Monkey Racks’,

<sup>54</sup> H. Cocks, “‘Sporty’ girls and ‘artistic’ boys: friendship, illicit sex, and the British “companionship” advertisement, 1913–1928”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 11 (2002), pp. 457–82. Cocks demonstrates that companionship advertisements and correspondence clubs were used to establish homosexual as well as heterosexual relationships and ‘represented and facilitated new styles of courtship and intimacy’, p. 481.

<sup>55</sup> M-O A, Topic Collection 32, ‘Sexual behaviour’, 1939–50, 12/16/E.

<sup>56</sup> M-O A, Summer 1990 directive, ‘Close relationships’, women no. A2168.

<sup>57</sup> M-O A, ‘Close relationships’, men no. B2490.

<sup>58</sup> Thomson, ‘Courtship and marriage in Preston’, p. 42. In the post-war period, opportunities to participate in dance hall culture could be framed by ‘race’ as a debate on the letters page of the *Manchester Evening News* headed ‘a coloured man who loves dancing says “They’re too tired when I ask them to dance”’ demonstrates. *Manchester Evening News*, 11 Nov. 1955, p. 12.

were delineated according to work identity via the medium of dress.<sup>59</sup> On the eve of the Second World War Mass-Observation asked its panel of volunteer writers to consider the relationship between social class and ‘love’, posing the question ‘if you are married, engaged or in love, state the part played in this situation by considerations of “class”?’<sup>60</sup> The majority of the predominantly middle-class correspondents initially denied the influence of class within their answers, preferring instead to advance a construction of love as something outside of established social relationships with comments such as ‘love rises above class’<sup>61</sup> and ‘in love there should be only one consideration, that is understanding’.<sup>62</sup> And yet, taken as a whole, the directive is remarkable for the extent to which class permeated and framed romantic encounters.

First there were explicit invocations of class, either in relation to personal choice or in reference to the ‘attitudes of others’. For example, one male respondent admitted that ‘I married a girl of my own class and I think it would have needed a considerable passion to have led me to marry anyone from a different class.’<sup>63</sup> Another observed that ‘I shouldn’t let a matter of “class” enter into consideration, though I suppose the other parties involved (parents, friends, and so on) certainly would. So actually, unless your beloved is, as free, legally and personally, as the wind, your choice is still nailed down to your own immediate circle.’<sup>64</sup> Beyond these explicit references to class identity, however, there is a sense to which a notion of ‘taste’, as employed by Bourdieu, served as a match-maker.<sup>65</sup> The comment of one man that ‘Class has never had anything to do with my emotional affairs, largely because only women of my own class or outlook attract me’<sup>66</sup> was common. The most frequently cited barriers to cross-class attraction were education and environment. One man claimed that ‘one is most likely to find someone with similar tastes and amusements, one with a similar education and background, one with whom one thinks one could bear to live the rest of ones life with, among one’s own class. An average factory girl would bore me stiff in five minutes.’<sup>67</sup> A female panellist explained that ‘I should only consider accent, taste and education; I should not be attracted towards anyone who was deficient in any one of these.’<sup>68</sup>

Within the responses to this particular directive the challenges posed by actual cross-class relationships or perceived differences of ambition were far more frequently articulated by women than by men, in part because the economic

<sup>59</sup> Thompson, ‘Courtship and marriage in Preston’, pp. 42–3.

<sup>60</sup> M-O A, June 1939 Directive, ‘Class’. <sup>61</sup> M-O A, ‘Class’, men no. 1234, born 1906.

<sup>62</sup> M-O A, ‘Class’, women no. 1458, born 1918.

<sup>63</sup> M-O A, ‘Class’, men no. 2057, born 1911.

<sup>64</sup> M-O A, ‘Class’, men no. 1631, born 1912.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Taste is a match-maker, it marries colours and also people, who make “well-matched couples”, initially in regard to taste.’ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste* (London, 2000), p. 243.

<sup>66</sup> M-O A, ‘Class’, men no. 2145, born 1915.

<sup>67</sup> M-O A, ‘Class’, men no. 1441, born 1917.

<sup>68</sup> M-O A, ‘Class’, women no. 1490, born 1914.

position of husbands largely overrode that of the woman in any given relationship.<sup>69</sup> ‘Marriage to my husband has been a continual drag-down’, wrote one woman. ‘I have lived like a hermit to avoid letting people see him. Have not dared to make friends with interesting or cultured people because he will smoke cheap tobacco, murder the Kings English and behave like a fool.’<sup>70</sup> Another asserted that ‘I would be more at home among wealthier surroundings. We are stuck through my husband while poorer brained women have forged ahead (through husbands) I want a fur-coat and a villa and a cat and a maid.’<sup>71</sup> In both cases there is a tangible sense of missed chances, lost opportunities, and unmet desires stemming from the initial choices made in courtship. In contrast, a school teacher from a working-class family background offered a narrative which challenges the archetypal representation of female social aspiration.

Two years ago I was engaged to be married to a young man, very public school and solid middle-class. I had told him that my people were poor, but I don’t think he took it in until he met them. ‘Class’ was not the only reason the engagement ended but the strongest one. Actually, I was not looking forward to marrying into his stuffy and rather unintelligent family, and would much rather have fallen in love with someone with the same history as myself. My brothers and sisters all thought him a snob, and stupid into the bargain, while he thought they were rather peculiar to be wanting to go to college instead of going out into the world and making money.<sup>72</sup>

For this woman the act of falling in love could transcend social class but the challenges of cross-class intimacy proved too significant to secure a long-term relationship.

Remembering that these responses were to questions posed in 1939, we might wonder whether the so-called People’s War, and a post-war egalitarian rhetoric, impacted upon cross-class romantic encounters. Certainly the geographical mobility of civilian war-workers, as well as servicemen and women, served to remove young people from the control of family and neighbourhood and allowed them access to a far greater range of potential partners. ‘Of course when the war started’, recalled one woman, ‘and the local men were called up it all changed as total (and much more glamorous strangers) came on the scene.’<sup>73</sup> Moreover, new employment opportunities could open up contact with members of the opposite sex. As one working-class woman born in 1920 observed of her war work on the trolley buses of Manchester, ‘I’d only been a machinist, among all women. You know, well then you went among all men ... It was completely different, it really brought me out, you know. If I’d’ve stayed machining among all women I don’t

<sup>69</sup> As a number of historians have demonstrated, the economic and social position of married women does not automatically mirror that of their husbands. Nonetheless, for the majority of British women in this period, choice of husband had a greater bearing upon future economic and social status than choice of occupation.

<sup>70</sup> M-O A, ‘Class’, women no. 1035, born 1889.

<sup>71</sup> M-O A, ‘Class’, women no. 1016, born 1887.

<sup>72</sup> M-O A, ‘Class’, women no. 2045, born 1895.

<sup>73</sup> M-O A, ‘Courting and dating’, women no. C2570, born 1921.

think I'd've ever had the courage to go out with a lad or get married.<sup>74</sup> To an extent, then, it seems that there was a certain fluidity in emotional attachments within these years, a fluidity which contemporary commentators viewed with considerable concern. 'Most girls have to meet their boyfriends without proper introductions nowadays', complained Leonora Eyles of *Woman's Own* in 1940, 'and the result is that they sometimes meet the wrong type of man.'<sup>75</sup> As the war continued 'the wrong type of man' acquired national and racial characteristics, notably in relation to African-American soldiers stationed across Britain from late 1942 onwards.<sup>76</sup> Yet in a study of courtship and mating conducted between 1943 and 1946, Moya Woodside observed that 'Husbands and wives resemble each other closely in respect of background, social standing, outlook, interests, even degree of intelligence. Chances of unselective mating, as depicted in the "shop-girl-marries-boss" wish dreams of the cinema are negligible.'<sup>77</sup> Social identities continued to cut through courtship practice and remained central to the question of who it might, or might not, be possible to love in the post-war world. One male *Mass-Observer* recalled of these years:

Looks made the first impression but looks alone without rapport counted for little. Speech was very important to me as southern English; a strong accent, a harsh or strident tone would have put me off. Hands were important; chewed nails, thick stubby fingers were a turn off. Most important was to feel at ease in her company; coming from a similar background can make this easier.<sup>78</sup>

Another explained the failure of a particular relationship in class terms: 'It wasn't an age difference that stopped me, but rather a class difference. Patricia was staff and middle class; I was a factory worker and working class. It was hopeless.'<sup>79</sup>

Interrogating the relationship between courtship, 'love', and social status also allows us to consider agency within the economy of gender relations. In a 1935 *Manchester Evening News* article, a 'Modern Girl' defended herself against the accusation that by going out with a boy she had no intention of marrying, she was in fact a 'gold-digger'.<sup>80</sup> Observing that 'from even my short experience it is apparent that women get the worst of this man-and-woman business in the end', she concluded that 'the only time when the scales are tipped in the woman's favour is when she is young'.<sup>81</sup> A widely acknowledged, if not universally adhered to, cultural expectation that financial responsibility for courtship rested with the male

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Ivy, 1994. Ivy was a working-class woman born in 1920 and married in 1943. The oral history interviews cited were conducted in 1994 as part of a project on women's leisure in twentieth-century England. For more details of the interview practice see Langhamer, *Women's leisure*, pp. 192–3.

<sup>75</sup> *Woman's Own*, 23 Mar. 1940, p. 42.

<sup>76</sup> See Sonya O. Rose, 'Girls and GIs: race, sex and diplomacy in Second World War Britain', *International History Review*, 19 (1997), pp. 146–60.

<sup>77</sup> Moya Woodside, 'Courtship and mating in an urban community', *Eugenics Review*, 38 (1946), pp. 29–30, at p. 30.

<sup>78</sup> M-O A, 'Courting and dating', men no. H2269, born 1920.

<sup>79</sup> M-O A, 'Courting and dating', men no. B1989, born 1927.

<sup>80</sup> *Manchester Evening News*, 3 Jan. 1935, p. 3.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

had its basis in the higher wages which young men could expect to earn.<sup>82</sup> In the post-war years, however, young women were increasingly willing *and able* to pay their own way within courtship. As well as signifying their growing financial independence, a determination to self-finance courtship practices reflected a desire to control male expectations and behaviour: 'then they don't expect anything of you' was how one of the girls surveyed by Pearl Jephcott in 1945 put it.<sup>83</sup> Nonetheless, relationships with men remained one method of financing leisure activities, the latter sometimes being more attractive than the former as one middle-class woman recalled of the 1950s: 'I'm afraid I was a bit naughty really, I just used him to take me out, to dances and things, you know, I wasn't really that interested, but it was somebody to go out with.'<sup>84</sup> Courtship could, of course, also close down leisure opportunities for women. The flight of women from the dance floor, when involved in a serious relationship, was observed by a number of social researchers across the period and is just one example of the disruptive effect of courtship on long established leisure practices and social networks.<sup>85</sup>

The 'gold-digger' motif within courtship rhetoric raised inherent contradictions when related to the choice of romantic partner.<sup>86</sup> Despite discursive constructions of love which sought to remove it from its material context, working-class women, in particular, were encouraged to look for financial security in marriage. This consideration could lead to a prudent rejection of the 'love match' in favour of the 'good' catch capable of becoming a reliable and solid breadwinner.<sup>87</sup> In her oral history of women in the Potteries, Jacqueline Sarsby found that many who courted in the 1930s confessed to 'not really liking the look of' their future husband when they first met.<sup>88</sup> Natalie Higgins suggests that working-class women most valued 'clean', decent', 'hard-working' men who were not sexually 'pushy'. In marked contrast, Higgins's male interviewees constructed their courtship narratives around 'love, infatuation, love at first sight and physical attractiveness'.<sup>89</sup> Indeed for women, if not men, the tension between 'love', passion, and the sensible choice could cause considerable anxiety. A concerned young woman wrote to *Woman's Own* in 1945 that 'I heard a talk on the wireless lately saying that if you marry simply because you are violently in love, your marriage may fail. My boyfriend and I are passionately in love, and now I feel worried in case we are making a mistake.'<sup>90</sup>

<sup>82</sup> See M-O A, July 1939 Directive, 'Jazz and age differences', for an indication of resistance to this arrangement.

<sup>83</sup> Pearl Jephcott, *Rising twenty* (London, 1948), pp. 74–5.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Amy 1994. Amy was born in 1936 and married in 1959.

<sup>85</sup> Langhamer, *Women's leisure*, pp. 128–9.

<sup>86</sup> Judy Giles, "'Playing hard to get": working-class women, sexuality and respectability in Britain, 1918–40', *Women's History Review*, 1 (1992), pp. 239–55.

<sup>87</sup> Judy Giles, "'You meet 'em and that's it": working class women's refusal of romance between the wars in Britain', in Pearce and Stacey, eds., *Romance revisited*.

<sup>88</sup> Sarsby, *Missuses and mouldrunners*, p. 73.

<sup>89</sup> Higgins, 'The changing expectations and realities of marriage', pp. 91–107.

<sup>90</sup> *Woman's Own*, 20 Apr. 1945, p. 18.

Courtship choices were framed by material consideration but it is important not to see instrumentality as related only to material or social circumstance. Instrumentality in courtship could also reflect a desire to re-make the self and through romantic choices to select partners who allowed for this transformation. Although the opportunities were ultimately bounded, courtship as a life cycle stage did offer the *potential* to explore a number of different selves and roles.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, life history material offers individual narratives of desires unmet, chances not taken, and selves unfulfilled. For example, one Scottish woman born in 1921 recounted her own formative moment:

My one and only real love affair when I was 18/19. Innocent, uneducated, ignorant, I fell in love with a 27 year old airman. He was handsome, unusual, highly intellectual and way, way above my own experience. For one reason or another it had to end and to this day I wonder whether that relationship would have been a total disaster or the beginning of a new life, a lifelong learning. He was so determined to marry me and I was so frightened.<sup>92</sup>

Here, the dangers and potentialities of a 'real love affair' are outlined with affecting poignancy. There is also a suggestion that it is only in retrospect that the authenticity of an emotional attachment can be judged.

Mass-Observation evidence provides examples of women, both working class and middle class, who looked to intimate relations actively to make a different sort of life for themselves, or at least a life different from that of their mothers. This is not to suggest that such women strove for social mobility through hypergamy, although the evidence below indicates that some clearly did. Nor is it to suggest that they aspired to romantic fulfilment through 'companionate marriage', although the desire and potential for self-actualization through love has already been discussed. It is rather to assert, as others have in studies of employment and leisure, that young women were agents of social change across this period.<sup>93</sup> Because married life remained a woman's primary 'career' this agency is sharply evident within the sphere of love and courtship, as, ultimately, is its bounded-ness.

One woman responded to the 1939 directive on class by stating that 'I am at present fond of a man whose birth is superior to my own, whose position is assured and pension able and whose family numbers no black sheep among its members and I rather think my affection is conditional, perhaps born of the fact that he would lever me upwards.'<sup>94</sup> Another offered a clear indication of the malleability of 'love' in relation to future prospects:

I went to a party and was introduced to two men. Both seemed equally presentable to me at first until I heard that one was a printer and the other a medical student in his last year.

<sup>91</sup> On role exploration see Peter Bailey, "'Will the real Bill Banks please stand up?'" Towards a role analysis of mid-Victorian working-class respectability', *Journal of Social History*, 12 (1979), pp. 336–53.

<sup>92</sup> M-O A, 'Courting and dating', women no. F1560, born 1921.

<sup>93</sup> See K. Milcoy, 'Image and reality: working-class teenage girls' leisure in Bermondsey during the interwar years' (D.Phil. thesis, Sussex, 2000), p. 225; Selina Todd, 'Poverty and aspiration: young women's entry to employment in inter-war England', *Twentieth Century British History*, 15 (2004), pp. 119–42; Jerry White, *The worst street in north London: Campbell Bunk, Islington, between the wars* (London, 1986).

<sup>94</sup> M-O A, 'Class', women no. 1286, born 1890.

I liked them both to begin with but am now in love with the student. At first it was because I liked the idea of being a doctor's wife better than a printer's – though the latter will probably have a better income. The doctor seemed to belong to a higher 'class' than the printer, though socially they move in the same circle. This I think was the fact that made me think more about the student, though now of course he genuinely means a great deal more to me than the printer.<sup>95</sup>

Both of these 'telling cases' demonstrate that the way in which love was subjectively 'felt' was rooted in material and cultural, as well as emotional, considerations.<sup>96</sup> This suggests that whilst pragmatism did indeed loom large in spousal selection, as Natalie Higgins has argued, this was not necessarily a counterpoint to romantic love as she seems to suggest. Rather, pragmatism could itself inform narratives of 'falling in love'.<sup>97</sup>

During wartime the relationship between agency, self-actualization, and courtship was further complicated. In a report sent to Mass-Observation in 1942, entitled 'The great Digby man-chase', a WAAF observer claimed that 'to get a man is not sufficient. Its easy to get a man: in fact its difficult not to. Competitive factors in the Great Man-Chase are under the following headings: quality; quantity; intensity. The decisive qualities are rank/wings; looks; money; youth in that order.'<sup>98</sup> The wartime mobility of single people certainly had an effect as one man recalled: 'Uniforms and postings to places where they were unknown gave our lovers anonymity and lack of self-consciousness.'<sup>99</sup> Moreover, the arenas for romantic meetings shifted during the war, for example the pub became a venue more frequently used by women as well as men.<sup>100</sup> Yet within this changed landscape instrumentality remained. Oral history evidence held by the Imperial War Museum suggests that the women who increasingly visited public houses in search of romantic encounters selected the venue according to the type of man they wished to meet. Recalling her experiences in the WAAF, one working-class woman emphasized the importance of personal contacts in allowing her access to particular arenas: 'That was an officer's pub, definitely. And I got there purely because of Helen and the friends that she'd already made on the station ... And after that, that remained my criteria right through the forces you know, to sort of always go to the, a better place than you had any right to be in really.'<sup>101</sup> Elsewhere, Pearl Jephcott discovered that the wartime girls she surveyed were

<sup>95</sup> M-O A, 'Class', women no. 1662, born 1917.

<sup>96</sup> For a discussion of the 'telling case' approach in the context of Mass-Observation evidence see Sheridan, Street, and Bloome, *Writing ourselves*, p. 14.

<sup>97</sup> Higgins, 'The changing expectations and realities of marriage', p. 90.

<sup>98</sup> M-O A, Topic Collection 32, 'Women in wartime, 1939–1945', 32/3/E, 'WAAF: reports from an observer 1941–1942. The great Digby man-chase'.

<sup>99</sup> M-O A, File Report 3086, 'Love-making in public', Feb. 1949, p. 11.

<sup>100</sup> C. Langhamer, "'A public house is for all classes, men and women alike': women, leisure and drink in Second World War England', *Women's History Review*, 12 (2003), pp. 423–43.

<sup>101</sup> Imperial War Museum, interview no. 6637.

keenly attuned to the kind of company to be found at different dance halls, and selected venues according to this criteria.<sup>102</sup>

'Young girls expect or hope that they will be able to cross the borderline of their class by marriage', wrote Ferdynand Zweig in 1952, adding that 'marriage, not work or study, is the main door of escape from class membership, and the status of a woman is primarily determined by the status of her husband. It is a reflected, not an autonomous, status.'<sup>103</sup> Attention to women's own accounts of courtship practice suggests that Zweig's analysis over-simplified what was a far more complex negotiation of aspiration, desire, and prudence within individual lives. It is certainly important not to exaggerate the extent to which significant social mobility was effected through romantic choice. Whilst female hypergamy was indeed a staple of women's magazine fiction across the period, and male hypergamy a theme of the angry young men literature of the late 1950s, similarities in social status remained the norm amongst courting couples. Studies by Glass and Goldthorpe suggest that there was no fundamental opening up of the social structure within this period.<sup>104</sup>

Of course instrumentality was not simply a matter for the individual. Families also played a role in the aspiration they had for their younger members, boys as well as girls. In this respect the agency of youth could come into conflict with various degrees of parental authority. Parents controlled the choices available to their children through educational provision and social contact. As one man observed of the 1950s:

My mother, being a devout Christian and churchgoer, fearing that I might get into the wrong company watched like a hawk, from a distance and hoped that I would restrict my choice to those 'nice' girls who she knew from the church ... She tried to discourage anything that might distract from our studies and exams. University was her ambition for 'her boys'. We were forbidden to frequent pubs and billiard halls as dens of iniquity, but we went covertly and with a little feeling of guilt all the same.<sup>105</sup>

Parental views on the appropriateness of particular liaisons could reflect prevailing prejudice, notably hostility towards inter-racial relations.<sup>106</sup> Recalling her two years at Clarks commercial college in the early 1930s one Mass-Observer wrote that there were 'lots of foreigners there and about the only objection my parents had to my going out with boys was no foreigners, a shame because they were so charming'.<sup>107</sup> During wartime, the presence of non-British military personnel extended the field of potential romantic encounters for women, but could provoke parental and societal disapproval. Sonya Rose has shown that girls and

<sup>102</sup> Jephcott, *Rising twenty*, p. 150.    <sup>103</sup> F. Zweig, *Women's life and labour* (London, 1952), p. 122.

<sup>104</sup> D. V. Glass, ed., *Social mobility in Britain* (London, 1954); John H. Goldthorpe, *Social mobility and class structure in modern Britain* (Oxford, 1987).

<sup>105</sup> M-O A, 'Courting and dating', men no. M1544, born 1934.

<sup>106</sup> On miscegenation anxieties in interwar Britain see Lucy Bland, 'White women and men of colour: miscegenation fears in Britain after the Great War', *Gender and History*, 17 (2005), pp. 29–61.

<sup>107</sup> M-O A, 'Courting and dating', women no. S521, born 1913.

women who consorted with American GIs, particularly black American GIs, were constructed as ‘anti-citizens’ and subject to considerable pressure to desist.<sup>108</sup> Responding to a wartime letter regarding friendship with a black soldier the *Woman’s Own* ‘agony aunt’, Leonora Eyles, was clear that such liaisons should not be encouraged. ‘Although coloured people are just as good as white ones’, she advised, ‘you must see that marriage between you would stand little chance of happiness for either of you. I think you would be very wise to end the friendship.’<sup>109</sup> Patterns of post-war immigration provided another testing ground for the much vaunted ‘blindness’ of love. When Trevor Philpott posed the question ‘Would you let your daughter marry a Negro?’, in a 1954 *Picture Post* article, he demonstrated that romantic encounters carried a symbolic, and very public, significance beyond the actual individuals involved.<sup>110</sup>

#### IV

In February 1949 a Mass-Observation report entitled ‘Love-making in public’ drew upon panel responses to questions on this subject.<sup>111</sup> The definition of ‘love-making’ used within this report is left somewhat vague, although it records the views of a fifty-five-year-old university lecturer as constituting a definition that would be accepted by most: ‘Making love is a very elastic term; I here define it as including all of the normal activities of lovers towards one another short of what would provoke interference from a not excessively zealous policeman.’<sup>112</sup> Other responses quoted demonstrate the gendered and classed dimensions of attitudes towards public display: women were considerably more likely to be opposed to it than men. The primary reason for condoning love-making in public was ‘sympathy for the lovers who have nowhere private to go’. As one fifty-seven-year-old housewife put it:

I don’t like it at all, because love-making is perhaps the most intimate and personal thing imaginable. However, if young people have crowded homes and no privacy, what can they do? Better make love in a park, with what privacy one can find, than with grinning relatives around! I find it frightfully embarrassing to meet entwined lovers in public places, but I’m more sorry for their lack of privacy than shocked. It’s not their fault ... if I were young I’d hate to make love in public. I’ve always wanted complete privacy for making love.<sup>113</sup>

A young unmarried man drew on his own experiences in stating that ‘I don’t like the idea of making love in public at all but it is a question of lack of opportunity. Someday a philanthropist will start a centre of courting rooms.’<sup>114</sup> Those who objected to the public display of love cited their own embarrassment and a

<sup>108</sup> Sonya O. Rose, *Which people’s war? National identity and citizenship in wartime, Britain 1939–1945* (Oxford, 2003), p. 79.

<sup>109</sup> *Woman’s Own*, 16 Feb. 1945, p. 22.

<sup>110</sup> Trevor Philpott, ‘Would you let your daughter marry a Negro?’, *Picture Post*, 30 Oct. 1954, pp. 21–3.

<sup>111</sup> M-O A, ‘Love-making in public’.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

conviction that love-making should remain private as key concerns. An eighteen-year-old engineering apprentice explained that 'I think that it is "un-English" and is one of those things that is not done ... In intimate matters of this kind privacy is essential, unless one is a savage.'<sup>115</sup> The 'English' attitude towards intimacy was satirized by the Hungarian émigré George Mikes in his highly successful book, first published in 1946, *How to be an alien*:

If a continental youth wants to declare his love to a girl, he kneels down, tells her she is the sweetest, the most charming and ravishing person in the world, that she has *something* in her, something peculiar and individual which only a few hundred thousand other women have and that he would be unable to live one more minute without her. Often, to give a little more emphasis to the statement, he shoots himself on the spot. This is a normal, week-day declaration of love in the more temperamental continental countries. In England the boy pats his adored one on the back and says softly: 'I don't object to you, you know.' If he is quite mad with passion, he may add: 'I rather fancy you, in fact.'<sup>116</sup>

So where was developed courtship conducted across the central years of the twentieth century and how was the relationship between public display and private intimacy mediated? The cinema was, of course, *the* arena for courtship: the archetypal public space with a private dimension, a Mass-Observation study of 1949 found that the cinema was twice as popular for courtship practice than any other activity, although walks and dancing were also popular.<sup>117</sup> Indeed, a number of cinemas were explicit in promoting their role as arenas for courtship as the provision of double seats on the back row indicates. And yet the pursuit of private intimacy within a public leisure arena could cause tensions amongst cinema-goers. One thirty-three-year-old housewife told Mass-Observation in the late 1940s that 'I think people should please themselves as far as love-making in public is concerned, but if they want to sit cheek to cheek in the pictures I would rather they chose the back row as it is very difficult to look through or round two people glued together.'<sup>118</sup> Moreover, conflicts of interest could emerge between courting couples which attest to the competing uses which this single leisure space was put to. As a twenty-one-year-old nurse observed, 'I have no objection to having somebody's arm around me in the pictures but kissing is definitely *out*. For one thing it makes you miss bits of the picture and for another it's too inclined to make a noise, and that's inexcusable!'<sup>119</sup>

Beyond the cinema, however, it is pretty clear that any leisure activity was a potential arena for developed courting activity. From the Lyons Corner tea house through to the post-war coffee bar, as each new leisure arena developed it was used by courting couples. Perhaps the clearest change over time concerns a process whereby courting became simultaneously *less* private (moving from clearly defined venues such as the evening walk, home, cinema, and dance hall to

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>116</sup> George Mikes, *How to be an alien* (1946, London, 1962) p. 24. I am grateful to Csilla Hajnal-Smith for this reference.

<sup>117</sup> M-O A, File Report 3150, 'Teen-age girls', Aug. 1949, p. 12.

<sup>118</sup> M-O A, 'Love-making in public', p. 9.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

virtually any youthful leisure arena) and *more* private (in that community and parental control declined in importance so that youthful courtship became relatively autonomous). Courting couples were increasingly positioned within the public realm of consumption, fuelling public discussion of youthful sexuality, but this was an arena which facilitated the creation of ‘islands of privacy’ within it.<sup>120</sup>

In the 1930s the need for intimate relationships to be sanctioned by the family persisted: etiquette dictated that the man should visit his girlfriend’s home first. Describing his courtship experiences on the eve of war, a retired decorator outlined the invitation to come to Sunday tea as ‘a most terrifying experience’:

After being led into the house, usually the parlour in which a fire had been set for the first time in years, you’d find all the family lined up in their Sunday best and the table laid with a dazzling white cloth. There would be matching plates and cups and saucers and a cake on a glass stand. A trifle in a glass bowl, neatly cut bread already buttered, and of course, that most essential for all significant occasions, the red salmon. Everybody would pretend to be jolly while putting you under the closest scrutiny, you wouldn’t know what to say and yet no banal word uttered or nervous gesture would get you off the hook.<sup>121</sup>

During wartime, however, the mobility of young people unsettled existing familial and community control. As one *Mass-Observer* suggested, ‘it was extraordinary to be in a sense an adult and freed from the shackles of family’.<sup>122</sup> Courtship etiquette adapted to the exigencies of war whereby ‘love-making had often to be done hurriedly on a 24-hour pass and in a district to which both were visitors’.<sup>123</sup> For many involved in the war effort serious courtships were maintained only through the love letter, an intensely private communication although subject to military censorship nonetheless. In this context relationships developed away from the observations of family and community. A retired carpenter told *Mass-Observation* of his own wartime courtship:

So we separated for four years. It took nearly a year before her first letter reached me, it had been chasing me all over the Middle East. After a few letters over a couple of years, I wrote suggesting that we got engaged and enclosed some money in the letter for a ring ... Four months later I received a letter showing the girl friend wearing the engagement ring she had chosen.<sup>124</sup>

Family approval for developed courting relationships regained a degree of importance in the post-war world. ‘Any mother wants to have a look at her daughter’s young man. She wants to see the goods laid out on the table’, Young and Wilmott were told by one woman in post-war London.<sup>125</sup> In fact they included a section entitled ‘courting the mother-in-law’ in their mid-1950s study of

<sup>120</sup> Illouz, *Consuming the romantic utopia*, p. 56.

<sup>121</sup> M-O A, ‘Courting and dating’, men no. R1418, born 1922.

<sup>122</sup> M-O A, ‘Courting and dating’, men no. L1504, born 1926.

<sup>123</sup> M-O A, ‘Love-making in public’, p. 11.

<sup>124</sup> M-O A, ‘Courting and dating’, men no. T2741, born 1921.

<sup>125</sup> M. Young and P. Willmott, *Family and kinship in east London* (1957, London, 1962), p. 70.

the East End.<sup>126</sup> However, as Todd has suggested, increased earning opportunities led to increased independence in relations with parents,<sup>127</sup> and the post-war years saw a dramatic rise in young people's wages.<sup>128</sup> Financial access to leisure brought with it independent access to courtship arenas as the romanticization of leisure continued apace. By 1956 one guide to modern manners suggested that

Today there is a tendency for the young man to meet his girl at a friend's party, to date her at the cinema or the club and drop her off at her home. And parents have got used to it. In fact, parents are growing to accept the idea that their offspring go out when they like, and few questions asked. Until one day they casually remark: 'I'm going to marry John.'<sup>129</sup>

In the post-war period negotiations between parents and their children concerning the conduct of long term courtships were differently weighted, despite the fact that most lower middle-class and working-class young people continued to live with their parents until marriage. Parental disapproval could still act as a serious barrier to relationships: consent was needed to marry under the age of twenty-one in England and Wales, unless magistrate's approval could be gained. The ritual of requesting parental permission to marry a daughter persisted. Nonetheless, the maturing identity of 'youth', and emphasis upon its social and financial autonomy, led to a reduction in parental control, if not parental interference, in the everyday courtships of youth.

## V

Mid-century heterosexual courtships did, ultimately, provide training in appropriate gender roles. Despite shifts in women's employment opportunities and earnings and the rhetoric of companionate marriage, the economy of serious courtship continued to reflect a male breadwinner model even if that model was under threat. Moreover, physical intimacy within courtship developed within the context of a persisting sexual double standard. The opprobrium heaped upon the unmarried mother throughout the period ensured that a fear of 'getting into trouble' or 'losing one's head' underlined intimate relations for women without access to reliable contraception. Dominant discourses of romantic love, as feminists have argued, ultimately worked to contain men and women within heterosexual monogamous marriage.<sup>130</sup> In 1970 Shulamith Firestone went as far as to suggest that 'love, perhaps even more than childbearing, is the pivot of women's oppression today'.<sup>131</sup> More recently, however, feminist analyses of romantic love have explored its potentialities as well as its limitations.<sup>132</sup> This article has suggested that a detailed analysis of youthful courtship practices allows us to move

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70–3.

<sup>127</sup> Todd, *Young women*, p. 196.

<sup>128</sup> Bill Osgerby, *Youth in Britain since 1945* (Oxford, 1998), p. 22.

<sup>129</sup> Anne Edwards and Drusilla Beyfus, *Lady behave: a guide to modern manners* (London, 1956), p. 239.

<sup>130</sup> See for example, Simone de Beauvoir, *The second sex* (London, 1953).

<sup>131</sup> Shulamith Firestone, *The dialectic of sex* (1970, London, 1979), p. 121.

<sup>132</sup> See for example, J. Radway, *Reading the romance: women, patriarchy and popular literature* (London, 1987).

towards a more nuanced understanding of love rooted in everyday experience. Romantic encounters offered a degree of agency to young women for whom marriage was their primary business, although this was an agency bounded by social status, the public gaze, and fluctuating degrees of parental control. 'Love' itself had the potential to act as a vehicle for the negotiation of the future and offered the promise of attaining a particular and desired version of the self. It provided a counterpoint to marital choices founded upon other considerations, but was also used instrumentally to actualize hopes and dreams which were not always rooted in romance. The quest for a home of one's own and rejection of domestic drudgery, in addition to a determination to participate in the growing leisure industries, became defining ambitions of successive generations of mid-century women.<sup>133</sup> Whilst young men continued to locate their selfhood within the spheres of work and leisure, young women worked within their allotted sphere of love and courtship to act as architects of their own lives and as active agents of social change.

In her response to the 2001 Mass-Observation directive one woman provided her understanding of the ideal 1960s courtship:

During a 'courtship', both of you would treat each other with the utmost respect, you would never dream of letting him see you in your curlers or even putting on your makeup. This sense of mystique was a real and important part of the excitement. You almost lived in a sort of perfect paradise that had to be sustained until you were married and it gave you a lovely feeling of being cherished and envied. It also gave you a sense of independence from your parents, in particular your father who didn't dare criticize you once you were seriously courting because another, unknown force thought you were perfect and it wouldn't do to criticize you in any way. You became an important person in your own right.<sup>134</sup>

This narrative touches on some of the themes with which this article has been concerned: the notion of courtship as a discrete moment within the life cycle, with particular significance for women; the strategic shaping of identity and careful presentation of the self which courtship demanded; the belief that independence and personhood could develop through intimate relations; and the way in which the act of courting diluted the potency of parental control. Courtship, within the historically specific context of near 'total marriage', constituted a transitional stage between gendered youth and gendered adulthood. This was a stage experienced by the vast majority of the population across social classes. Courtship therefore matters and merits attention in its own right as a significant stage in the life cycle. The study of courtship allows us to examine the complex ways in which 'love' was understood and deployed, within particular social relationships, and to consider how the everyday practice of love intersected with gender, class, and generational difference across mid-century England.

<sup>133</sup> On the rejection of domestic drudgery, rather than domesticity per se, see Langhamer, 'The meanings of home', pp. 357–60. On young women's relationship to the leisure industries see Langhamer, *Women's leisure*, pp. 49–112.

<sup>134</sup> M-O A, 'Courting and dating', women no. H1703, born 1947.