

“SIMMERING IN A FAMILY CAULDRON”: QUEER MODES OF KINSHIP IN IVY
COMPTON-BURNETT

By

Sarah Potts

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ABSTRACT

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Though her books have all but disappeared from commercial distribution and critical discourse, Ivy Compton-Burnett's prolific writing career garnered her a substantial readership during her lifetime, particularly during the Second World War. In the introduction to her 1984 biography entitled *Ivy: The Life of I. Compton-Burnett*, Hilary Spurling marvels that twentieth century readers attributed “the last word in modernity” to her novels. However, Compton-Burnett's works have remained largely neglected by criticism within the field of modernist studies.

Through the examination of four novels: *A House and its Head* (1935); *Elders and Betters* (1944); *Mother and Son* (1955); and *A God and His Gifts* (1963), I will chart the way Compton-Burnett's treatment of incestuous relationships and employment of camp humor function as a revelatory queer and feminist critique of the patriarchal family. Her novels illustrate the strange ways individuals operate within the repressive confines of the family system, revealing the ultimate failure of heteronormative and traditional modes of structuring the family unit. Through my work on her novels I hope to elucidate how serious contemplation of forgotten queer and female writers in modernism helps us see alternative ways of resistance and political writing apart from the violent revolt from the past that high modernists propagate.

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INTRODUCTION

In her 1925 novel *Pastors and Masters*, British writer Ivy Compton-Burnett studies the world inhabited by the pastors and schoolmasters of a boys' preparatory school and their respective domestic households. The novel, like most of Compton-Burnett's works, exhibits a deep suspicion of the domestic unit, performing a cruel dissection of the patriarchal family through scenes constituted almost exclusively of dialogue. In one such scene, Reverend Henry Bentley queries his daughter Delia:

“‘Are the boys coming?’ said the Reverend...
‘They are out of their room, Father,’ said his daughter.
‘I asked you if they were coming.’
‘They are out of their room, Father. We are all a little late this morning.’
‘I know we are late. I asked you if they were coming.’” (*Pastors and Masters* 57)

In an absurd exercise of patriarchal authority, Reverend Bentley demands semantic accuracy from his daughter, transforming a simple exchange between father and child into a cutting and dramatic moment of familial hostility. Compton-Burnett's reliance on pithy dialogue renders her fiction especially strange and compelling—her novels construct late-Victorian and Edwardian domestic spaces as sites of serious conflict between family members, but characters may utilize only the conventions of parlor-room conversation in their attempts to wrestle for power. Therein lies Compton-Burnett's brilliance—her searing critique of the heteronormative family structure occurs through the conventions and formalities the structure upholds.

Though her books have all but disappeared from commercial distribution and critical discourse, Ivy Compton-Burnett's prolific writing career of twenty novels between 1911 and 1963 (with the posthumous publication of her novel *The Last and the First* in 1971) garnered her a substantial readership during her lifetime, particularly during the Second World War. While never formally a part of the Bloomsbury Group, Compton-Burnett was a contemporary of many

such British modernist writers, even sending her 1929 novel *Brothers and Sisters* to be published at Hogarth Press. Though the manuscript was rejected, Woolf later expressed regret at this decision, famously describing her own writing as “much inferior to the bitter truth and intense originality of Miss Compton-Burnett” (Woolf 280).

Ivy Compton-Burnett’s novels—lovingly described by writer and critic Francine Prose as like “Jane Austen on bad drugs”—contain all the trappings of an Edwardian period drama: tragedy, money, adultery, wit, and murder, all neatly packaged within the fussy decorum of the upper-class British domestic sphere (Prose xi). Though she denied the presence of autobiographical elements in her work, readers cannot help but notice similarities between Compton-Burnett’s fiction and the events of her own tragic and peculiar family life, with the sudden death of her father in 1901, her younger brother in 1904, and the joint suicide of her two youngest sisters, who poisoned themselves on Christmas Day in 1917. Compton-Burnett’s particularly dark and twisted upbringing has undoubtedly made its way into her novels, wherein family trauma abounds, yet the repression of late-Victorian codes of conduct make the actualization of shared grief or authentic closure impossible.

Her novels are darkly humorous and bizarre social comedies, utilizing the Victorian family to raise radically modern questions about the nature of power, social hierarchies, and domesticity. In the introduction to her 1984 biography entitled *Ivy: The Life of I. Compton-Burnett*, Hilary Spurling emphasizes that contemporary readers attributed “the last word in modernity” to Ivy Compton-Burnett’s novels, in part due to the unique historical and literary position her work occupies (Spurling ix). Though her writing is aligned with a lineage of late-nineteenth century Decadence rather than the conventions of formal experimentation and fragmentation pioneered by modernist works, her work also champions a distinctly modernist

view toward traditional modes of organizing society and social institutions, employing an ironic awareness of the absurdity of these traditions in her depictions of them. Though her fictional settings often take place in the past, Compton-Burnett exhibits her distrust of institutions through a highly satirical and humorous form of writing, critiquing the failure of the family unit to progress out of outmoded expectations about proper familial roles and into modern times. Her works have remained largely neglected by criticism within the field of modernist studies and hidden from broader literary discussion, baffling her cult followers. Like many other queer women writers during the modern period, her novels have not received the acclaim granted to canonical modernists.

The invisibility of such queer and female writers within the field of modernism is certainly not unique to Ivy Compton-Burnett, nor is it a recent dilemma within modernist studies. Though not published until 2006, Rebecca Walkowitz and Douglas Mao's book *Bad Modernisms* centers around "the new modernisms"— a concept that had been circulating through modernist critical circles since the late 1990's. This view of modernist studies proposes an interrogation of the field's rigid definition of modernism, but more importantly a reconsideration of the qualifying factors necessary for artists to be considered "modernist," and therefore worthy of significant critical study. Even today, the new modernist studies argue for more scholarly engagement with writers whose work has been ignored or rejected by the canon of high modernism, such as "less widely known women writers, authors of mass cultural fiction, makers of the Harlem Renaissance, artists from outside Great Britain and the United States, and other cultural producers hitherto seen as neglecting or resisting modernist innovation" (Mao and Walkowitz 1). While Mao and Walkowitz continue to be cited as evidence of the traction gained by this move to expand the modernist canon, the persistent erasure of writers such as Ivy

Compton-Burnett is suggestive of the failure of the field to entirely rectify the exclusionary practices observed in the late nineties. Now over two decades later, new modernist studies is no longer new, and many queer women writers from the period continue to be overlooked. The ideology of the new modernist studies persists most notably through significant work on queer and feminist modes of reading modernist texts, and yet even this work is still somewhat marginalized within the field at large.

Both queer modernism and feminist modernism offer up useful lenses through which to view Ivy Compton-Burnett underneath the larger umbrella of the not-so-new modernist studies. In her 2018 introduction to the recently inaugurated journal *Feminist Modernist Studies*—the first and only scholarly journal of its kind to appear in the field thus far—editor Cassandra Laity laments the failure of modernism to adequately perform an “intensive, wide-ranging recovery of lost and underappreciated women writers,” a failure she perceives as integral to our understanding of the role women played in shaping modernity (Laity 2). While the recovery of marginalized women writers is undoubtedly important to the expansion of notions of modernism, Laity also posits that significant critical work on modernist women writers holds the potential to entirely alter our current definitions of modernism, inciting the essential discussions with which new modernist studies has attempted to engage. Ivy Compton-Burnett presents a valuable case study whose implications extend far beyond the project of recovery. Examination of her novels reveals not only the kinds of histories that are left out of the heteronormative narrative, but also offer up a revelatory queer and feminist mode of critique largely absent from the traditionally masculinist canon of modernism. Her scintillating depictions of family life do not set out to dismantle the family in an effort order to utterly discard it as an institution. They rather utilize

humor to exploit the absurdity of a patriarchal system of ordering the family and illustrate queer possibilities for familial structures that exist outside of a heteronormative, nuclear framework.

While Walkowitz and Mao fail to mention queer authors within their list of those to be included within new modernist studies, scholars have nevertheless taken up their call to pursue those on the margins of modernism through work on authors interested in sexual or gender dissidence. Queer modernism, provisionally defined by Benjamin Kahan as constitutive of “the sexually transgressive and gender deviant energies that help fuel modernism’s desire to thwart normative aesthetics, knowledges, geographies, and temporalities” provides a critical framework through which to view Ivy Compton-Burnett’s writing on the family (Kahan 348). Drawing from a queer modern tradition linked with the Decadence of the late-nineteenth century, Compton-Burnett’s representations of the family theorize about alternative possibilities for domestic structures outside of heteronormative hierarchies, thus “positioning queerness at the heart of modern life” (351). I argue that the elements of true agency in her fiction lie in the subversion and shifting of traditional family roles. Thus, Compton-Burnett presents a queer politics that proposes new formations of family bonds within the normative domestic space as a way of resisting familial oppression, thereby contributing to queer modernism’s project of striving to “forge new varieties of sexual personhood and of being” (358). Her work does not break with the past in order to critique it, but utilizes traditional, Victorian conceptions of the family in order to eviscerate them from within, thus proposing alternative, distinctly queer and modern methods of restructuring and repositioning familial bonds.

Compton-Burnett’s novels can be understood through each of these frameworks of new, queer, and feminist modernisms, thus making her representative of the kind of texts that continue to fall out of critical modernist discourse when these types of readings are ignored. However, her

work not only serves to embody the possibility of collaboration between these three subfields of scholarly work, but also to underscore the crucial histories that are excluded from conceptions of modernity when queer writers and women writers are excluded entirely from readings of modernism. Engagement with Compton-Burnett's novels is imperative to fully grasp the reality of the modernist period, as she works against ubiquitous notions of modernism as an aggressive, masculinist rupture from the past. Instead, Compton-Burnett works from within the framework of the past, bringing both the context of the elite Victorian family and the Decadent, camp aesthetic of the fin-de-siècle into the modernist moment, and making use of dark, camp humor and critique so biting that it sets her apart even from other feminist or queer modernists such as Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein.

I examine four of Compton-Burnett's novels: *A House and its Head* (1935); *Elders and Betters* (1944); *Mother and Son* (1955); and *A God and His Gifts* (1963). This temporally varied selection provides me with a comprehensive view of the scope of Compton-Burnett's exploration of the types of bonds that are possible outside of the heteronormative idea of relationships within the family. Each of the novels I have chosen to analyze presents modes of kinship that function in opposition to traditional familial roles: incestuous relationships between siblings, parents and children, and among cousins; maids and tutors accepted as members of the family; children with wisdom and pragmatism far beyond their years; and mothers who challenge the boundaries of what is expected or appropriate in traditional motherhood. I identify two main strains of thinking present in Ivy Compton-Burnett's work that operate in tandem to critique conventional family structures. In the first section, "Incestuous Relationships," I discuss Compton-Burnett's use of incest as a queer re-ordering of family relationships that affords agency to characters who are otherwise debilitated by their position in the domestic sphere. In my analysis of Compton-

Burnett's use of incest as a kind of liberatory tool for otherwise oppressed individuals, I draw largely on the work of Kadji Amin, whose unabashed evaluation of unsettling practices such as pederasty and racial fetishism in the works of Jean Genet represents a turn away from a longstanding tradition of idealization occurring within queer studies. My argument about incest is informed by an awareness that while Compton-Burnett's work offers up new models of affiliation, it does not promote utopian models. The types of queer bonds generated within these works are disturbing—both in their somewhat sinister nature, and their literal disturbance of the family unit. These novels demonstrate the challenges incurred when existing relational structures are disrupted, and reflect a consistent preoccupation with what it means to remake kinship. They do not shy away from representing the fall-out and potential pitfalls of these subverted roles, but do so in rich and complicated ways. In the second section, "Queer Camp Mothers and Children," I chart Compton-Burnett's use of camp humor in her depictions of motherhood and childhood to highlight the absurdity of the roles the traditional family structure requires of women and children. My analysis of the way humor functions as critique in Compton-Burnett's work is indebted to the work of many scholars who have theorized queer camp humor as a method of negotiating abuse and trauma within oppressive social structures and institutions. Through her utilization of humor, Compton-Burnett separates herself from the work of many other female writers who have criticized patriarchal expectations of motherhood—her novels portray oppressive family structures as deeply funny and entirely absurd. The children in her novels behave as little adults, enacting a performance of conventional family structures through their adaptation of appropriate modes of comportment, and thus foregrounding the inherent silliness of such social expectations. Likewise, in her bid to draw attention to the problematic roles women are forced into by the patriarchal family, Compton-Burnett does not idealize her female

characters. Rather, they are histrionic performers of their own perceived failures to fulfill the maternal ideal, rendered just as contradictory and ridiculous as their male counterparts. Though seemingly distinct, both the use of incest and the employment of camp humor in Compton-Burnett's illustrates the strange ways individuals operate within the repressive confines of the family system, revealing the ultimate failure of heteronormative and traditional modes of structuring the family unit.

It is this strange and dark portraiture of the family, mingled with defiance of convention, which makes engagement with Ivy Compton-Burnett worthwhile. Through this discussion I hope to elucidate how serious contemplation of forgotten queer and female writers in modernism helps us see alternative ways of resistance and political writing apart from the violent revolt and break with the past that high modernists propagate. While Compton-Burnett's use of the Victorian family structure as a basis for her political writing may dissuade modernist scholars on the basis that the subject is not "modern" enough, it is precisely through the antiquated institution of the patriarchal domestic system that Compton-Burnett is able to heed Ezra Pound's call to modernist writers to "make it new." Instead of breaking from the family institution entirely in order to critique it, Compton-Burnett utilizes the domestic scene in order to simultaneously bring out the humorous nature of the rules and limitations imposed on the family, but also to imagine alternative possibilities for kinship structures. Thus, engagement with Compton-Burnett's work offers up a challenge to the field of modernist studies by providing an alternative entry point into understandings of what constitutes modern, political writing. Contemplation of the way Ivy Compton-Burnett remakes and modernizes the traditions of the past through the lens of the family will advance the field of modernist studies and alter our current definitions of modernism.

INCESTUOUS RELATIONSHIPS

Incest is a central preoccupation over the corpus of Ivy Compton-Burnett's work. Both incestuous undertones and overt relationships between family members make their way into her novels, reflecting a fascination with the way incest is deployed as a method of abuse and trauma within families, but also how it functions as a mode of resistance against normative kinship structures. Compton-Burnett's contemplations on incest reflect the sense of anxiety around issues of relationships between family members at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Mary Jean Corbett has written extensively on the evolution of cultural meanings of incest throughout the Victorian era, a historical moment which undoubtedly shaped Ivy Compton-Burnett's experience and writings. As Corbett explains, middle- and upper-class Victorians perpetuated the centuries-old tradition of rationalizing intermarriages between family members as a means of protecting the family from strangers who threatened the maintenance of a pure bloodline. These marriages, unlike interrelations within lower class families, were not considered incestuous. Thus, for much of the nineteenth century incest was seen as morally wrong only in the lower classes, emphasized by sensationalized panic about the link between sexual depravity and overcrowded housing in urban areas. Public interest in this "savage" practice among the working class reached its peak in the 1880s, prompting a reconsideration of criminal penalties for such actions.

Discussions of incest in elite families finally began to take shape after the turn of the century, primarily through two major pieces of legislation. The Deceased Wife's Sister's Act passed in 1907 "legalized a union that was still prohibited by English law in the last decade of the nineteenth century on the grounds that it constituted incest" (Corbett 2). This highly debated act would allow a man to marry his dead wife's sister, thus allowing for what many thought to be

a rational and comfortable replacement for the role of wife and mother within the household. In 1908 the Punishment of Incest Act “criminalized sexual intercourse between parents and children, siblings of full or half blood, and grandfathers and granddaughters” (4). This definition accounted for “blood” relatives only, “leaving in-laws, step-relations, and adoptive kin out of the question entirely” (7). The possibility for “new social arrangements” between family members serves as a radical political move—a refusal to accept what was deemed appropriate, even at the expense of family security or acceptance (xi). Viewing Compton-Burnett’s novels in the wake of these discussions is revealing as to the motivation behind the widespread representation of incest in her work.

Relationships between blood relatives, relatives sanctioned through marriage, adopted family members and step-relations appear throughout Compton-Burnett’s novels. Many of these interrelations are incited by a male character who occupies the role of the head of the household, often serving as the primary site of trauma and horror within the family structure. *A God and His Gifts* (1963), for example, follows Hereward Egerton through his young adulthood into his old age, along with his wife Ada and their three sons, Salomon, Merton, and Reuben. As the sons grow older, each of them embark toward marriage with women outside the family. Both Merton and Reuben’s fiancées are pursued by their father Hereward, whose desire is heightened by the fantasy of these young women as his daughters, giving such commands as “You will come to me often, come when I am thought to be alone. It is what a daughter would do” (*A God and His Gifts* 73). It is later revealed that Hereward had an affair with his wife’s sister, resulting in a child who is also in danger of falling victim to her father’s sexual abuses. As its title suggests, this novel focuses around a god-like male character who successfully uses his position to foster incestuous relationships simply to satisfy his own desires. While this manifestation of family abuse enacted

through the seemingly unlimited power of patriarchal authority in Compton-Burnett's work is abundant, these are not the types of relationships that I find most fruitful to our understanding of how the politics of incest function within her novels. Rather, when incestuous relationships are viewed as a viable method of gaining power for those barred from such authoritative roles, it becomes clear just how fundamentally disempowered these characters are.

Out of the Nursery

Considering the systematic oppression of women through Victorian rhetoric on the role of mothers, wives, and daughters, it is no surprise that it is the female characters in Compton-Burnett's work that are often consumed by the need to maneuver their way up the ladder of the traditional, patriarchal family structure. Susan Crecy has written on these desperate grasps for family power, pointing out that "For most of Compton-Burnett's women, the home confines their vision. Not surprising, then, that in the only sphere in which they are recognized, enormous prestige should be invested in the directress of the household" (Crecy 16). The motivations of female characters to commit incest in Compton-Burnett's novels are critical to our understanding of how incest is utilized. In her novels, it quickly becomes clear that women are not only the victims, but often the perpetrators of incest. Consider Hereward Egerton's relationship with his sister Zillah. Descriptions of Zillah are spare, and the author does not provide us many opportunities to hear her voice in dialogue. Still, she seems to be not only a willing participant in a particularly intimate relationship with her brother, but also manages to pull the strings to ensure that she remains his first priority, however many other women come and go. Zillah is the only character permitted to "help" Hereward with his writing career, so much so that he refers to her as his "taskmistress," claiming in spite of his other relationships that he "serve[s] only the one" (*A God and His Gifts* 38). In Hereward's words, his proposal to his wife Ada "offers what is

usual, but it asks more,” inviting her to live in a home with his parents and sister, and even commanding that she share him with Zillah (33). Ada agrees to this arrangement and acknowledges the reverence of the “brother and sister relation” saying, “I shall go gently and keep a light touch. I shall not rush in where angels fear to tread” (37). The reader infers that within this sacred bond, secrets Hereward keeps from the rest of the family are shared with Zillah, perhaps even concocted alongside her, or with her guidance. Through this implicitly incestuous relationship with her brother, Zillah is afforded agency over the patriarch of the house, an agency no one else can claim. Zillah cultivates this agency for herself the only way she knows how—by manipulating her brother the way she has seen him manipulate those around him.

Sibling relationships are a recurrent theme in Compton-Burnett’s work, and as Hilary Spurling notes, were “a common enough pattern among cousins and uncles and aunts on both sides of the family in her own and her parents’ generations” (Spurling 4). Valerie Sanders argues that brother and sister relationships are the focus of many texts of the nineteenth century up through the first third of the twentieth century, a period “during which the English middle-class family evolved into its recognizable ‘nuclear’ form,” and developed new structures of family life within the domestic space (Sanders 3). As children were required to do less physical labor or work around the house, they “developed a culture of their own, which involved them in elaborately structured games and fantasies in parts of the house rarely visited by their parents,” nurturing the atmosphere for secret sexual alliances (3). Sanders also argues that the brother-sister relationship was a “place of relative safety” for young boys and girls to begin to investigate gender constructs as they compared themselves to their sibling of the opposite sex (4). It is within the family context that “the child first discovers his or her identity, first encounters

inequalities of treatment based on gender assumptions, and first learns what is expected of an adult male or an adult female” (9-10). It is here where the political implications of gender identity are first discovered, resisted, and internalized. Companionship between siblings offers an opportunity of evening the playing field for sisters and brothers—sisters can be viewed by their brothers as intellectual equals, while brothers can express their emotions without fear of chastisement and accusations of weakness.

The sibling relationship appears throughout Ivy Compton-Burnett’s works as a site of remove from the chaos and dysfunction of the family at large. Leila Silvana May has theorized the unique nature of the sibling relationship in the nineteenth century, particularly in light of the newly instituted emphasis on the nuclear family as a reflection of Victorian morality. Like Sanders, May sees the closeness of siblings as a direct result of the “ideological frontier between public and private domains bec[oming] increasingly pronounced” (May 15). This division between the outside world and the domestic space created pressure on the family from both sides—external forces regulated family behavior to align with larger social expectations, while internal pressures were imposed on the family by its own hierarchical structure and codes of behavior. For May, this internal pressure translates most significantly onto the sister figure, as a young girl would learn her role “as wife and mother by solicitously deferring to her brother,” thereby inhabiting the values and ideals her brother would look for in a future wife (18). Even so, May draws a distinction between this familial expectation placed on female children, and the retreat of the nursery which functioned as a “kind of androgynous space, a refuge from the rigors of instruction it was meant to enforce,” and would remain the sole site of socially appropriate heterosexual interaction until marriage for young Victorian women (20). The implications of this kind of family structure on sibling bonds reflect a larger view of Victorian culture as “permeated

by a denial of the potential for incest and a deeply entrenched anxiety about its possibility” (22). This anxiety makes its way into several of Compton-Burnett’s novels, where sibling relationships seem directly linked to the affectionate kinship formed as a necessary refuge from familial repression and misery.

The closeness of siblings promoted by the Victorian period manifests in Compton-Burnett’s novels in ways that allude to incest. In *Elders and Betters* (1944), the impetus of the plot is predicated upon the repression of the desire that Benjamin Donne and his sister Jessica feel for one another, which is inherently linked to their tragic failure to gain control over their own lives. Instead of finding agency through a formation of family bonds that would allow for the enduring affection fostered as children, they must adhere to more “acceptable” sibling roles. The novel begins after the widowed Benjamin and his children Esmond, Anna, Bernard, and Reuben have moved to be closer to Jessica and her family. Jessica and her husband Thomas Calderon have four children— Terence, Tullia, Theodora and Julius—and also living with them is Benjamin and Jessica’s youngest sister Susan, affectionately called Sukey. Sukey’s illness is an excuse for the family to be in closer proximity, initially at the resistance of the children on both sides. Benjamin, however, cannot hide his devotion to his sisters from his children, who perceive a change in his tone whenever he speaks of them. This “family devotion” seems very unusual to them, but Benjamin takes great pains to normalize it, saying, “The relation of brother and sister goes back to the first days. It has its roots in the beginning. There may be stronger feeling, but never the same understanding” (*Elders and Betters* 42). Even Jessica’s husband Thomas expresses the inevitability of the reunion of the siblings, saying they “are so bound up in each other, that even their children seem apart. They should have been able to reproduce like some lower forms of life, by means of pieces broken off themselves” (58). Benjamin and

Jessica's affinity for one another is unquestionably stronger than the affinity either show toward Sukey, and the author gives subtle hints as to the nature of their relationship in several scenes. One such moment occurs when the children of both families finally begin to take a liking to one another soon after the move:

“Have we produced a pair of kindred spirits?” said Jessica, smiling at her brother and looking at their eldest sons. Benjamin nodded in understanding, but at once withdrew his glance, lest his children should see it.” (76)

Benjamin's carefully measured gestures reveal his attempts to hide his feelings for Jessica, just as Jessica's constant reflection on herself as “a weak and stumbling person for a mother” invites the assumption that both Jessica and Benjamin are struggling to repress the sibling closeness and desire fostered in their youth (144). For Jessica, it seems that she views her rightful place as being the closest woman in her brother's life, idealizing the possibility of mothering his children, and even smiling “on her brother's motherless flock, in a simpler kindness than that she felt for her own” (69). However, the impossibility of ever occupying this space again leads to her depression, exhibited through her withdrawal from her own children and eventual suicide. A renewed consummation of Jessica's desire for her brother could allow her to experience the equality and agency of the childhood nursery, but the denial of this desire in favor of requisite Victorian familial roles leaves her feeling powerless, and ultimately proves too much for her to bear.

Kissing Cousins

Like sibling relationships, cousin marriages appeared as a fairly commonplace occurrence throughout British literature well into the nineteenth century. However, the *fin-de-siècle* saw this kind of marriage reconsidered and recoded, as the ability to choose one's partner and marry for romantic love became more popular, and anxiety about the biological and financial

safekeeping of the family line waned. In fact, contemporary discourse began to shift to consider the biological dangers of interfamily relationships. A. H. Bittles has written on the “increased concerns ... being expressed on the adverse health effects of first-cousin marriage” in the first half of the nineteenth century (Bittles 1454). Reports from France proposed a correlation between an increase in deaf-mutism and unions between first cousins, which was later followed by a study in the United States that showed “a significant positive relationship between early deaths and degrees of consanguinity” (1455). In 1839, Charles Darwin married his first cousin, but later spoke candidly about the adverse effects of this decision due to the health issues and early deaths experienced by his children. Darwin expressed these concerns in his 1862 work, *Fertilisation of Orchids*, where he delineated the risks of inbreeding, and preached the benefits of cross-fertilization to spread favorable traits among the species. However, to reach an even broader audience, Darwin worked to persuade his friend Sir John Lubbock, a Member of Parliament at the time, to “petition Parliament for the inclusion of a question on the prevalence of first-cousin marriage in the 1871 Census of Great Britain and Ireland” (1455). This proposal was dismissed on the grounds that questions of this nature were intrusive and insensitive to the families taking part in these types of relationships. Though Darwin, his son George, and his half-cousin Francis Galton all continued work on assessing the prevalence of consanguineous marriages—studying the marriages of individuals with the same surnames and comparing them to recorded health issues of genetic origins—the United Kingdom was still hesitant to enact any legislation on this issue. Meanwhile, the United States had “already introduced legislation to control or ban first-cousin marriage” in thirteen states by the end of the nineteenth century (1457). The resistance of the United Kingdom to acknowledge the biological and ethical

precarities of consanguinity serves as evidence of the cultural weight marriages between cousins carried within the English cultural consciousness.

To understand the persistence of England's attachment to cousin marriage, it is integral to contemplate the political and social capital such an interfamily relationship would provide. Schaffer has also written on the topic of consanguineal marriage, particularly with regard to how the emotional values and long-term implications of these relations were tied up with Victorian concepts of marriage and kinship. The idea of cousins marrying "perpetuate[d] older notions about marriage: alliance with a clan, reinforcement of kin claims, compassionate trust rather than romantic passion" (Schaffer 161). Schaffer theorizes about women's role in cousin marriages, and how Victorian women in particular were afforded the potential for more agency through a cousin marriage than a marriage to a stranger. For women in the late nineteenth century, marriage to a cousin would grant the potential "to retain multiple identities as sister, daughter, friend, instead of becoming solely a wife" (161). The emphasis on the multiplicity of potential roles to be inhabited by women, rather than viewing marriage as an "individual, privatized, sexual choice," can help us make sense of Compton-Burnett's use of cousin marriages throughout her novels (172). In a world where women's circumstances are severely delimited, making the choice to marry a cousin could be a viable and even preferable grasp at power.

For two of the female characters in *Elders and Betters*, cousin marriages function as the primary vehicle toward gaining a superior role within the family. Benjamin Donne's eldest daughter Anna will pursue any relationship necessary to secure her place of authority within the domestic sphere. Initially, Anna finds agency through inhabiting the role of her father's companion after the death of her mother, saying, "Father and I have done pretty well together ... Perhaps the better, that he has had no other woman to depend on" (*Elders and Betters* 275). She

does not evoke the sense of having been affected by her mother's death, hazy on the details of how she died, and even stating, "I may not be as unhappy as might be thought. There is a certain gain to the daughter in being the mistress of the house" (44). However, after the Donnes move to be closer to their cousins, this position is quickly placed in jeopardy by Benjamin's renewed companionship with his sister. Fearful of losing her place as "matriarch" of the family, Anna works to dismantle any possibility of Jessica's overtaking this role. She does not attempt to veil her contempt for her Aunt Jessica, berating her for being a poor mother and generally attacking her character as a woman, saying, "You do your best to cast a cloud of gloom and guilt over everyone in your path. No one can be with you, without being the victim of it" (198). Anna perceives Jessica as a threat to her relationship with her father—the relationship which gives her the most influence over the other family members and in society at large—and goes to extreme lengths to unseat her through the manipulation of Sukey's will in her dying days. With the family fortune ripped away from her, Jessica confronts Anna, only to be subject to more of Anna's attempts to convince her that "a cloud would be lifted from the household" if she were gone (200). Within a matter of pages, Jessica kills herself, leaving Anna as the victor in her fight to become the female head of the family. Anna solidifies this place she has systematically worked to attain through her marriage to Terence, her cousin and Jessica's son. A cousin marriage would allow her to retain her fortune, as opposed to relinquishing it to a husband from outside the family. Anna's "resolve to hold to her money had its root, had her cousin known it, in her feeling to himself" (213). It is through this interrelation with her cousin that Anna is able to maintain the maximum amount of authority and agency possible.

Compton-Burnett illustrates the perceived benefits of a marriage between cousins in the frequency with which it occurs in her novels. In *Elders and Betters*, Anna's marriage to her

cousin Terence subsequently sparks Bernard and Tullia's cousin marriage, a union which will also grant Tullia a sense of authority within the family to which she had not previously had access. Throughout the novel, Tullia has attempted to exercise control over the Calderon family, particularly in light of her mother Jessica's failures. She has tried to assume the role of mother figure even to her mother, asked by Terence, "Why should you help and guide your mother? It is for her to do that for you" (56). The death of Jessica opens up the potential for Tullia to creep closer to the matriarch role also coveted by Anna, but she must remain in close proximity to the family in order to do so. Thus, she marries her cousin Bernard, a marriage which will preserve a place both in her father's life and the life of her younger siblings. As to the matter of Theodora and Julius' loss of their mother, Tullia's fulfillment of the motherhood role seems natural to her:

"The children will be Father's and mine,' said Tullia, in a manner so incidental that it hardly required her to move her eyes. 'I know what my mother wished for them. There will be no change there.'" (281)

For Tullia, just as for Anna, marrying within the family is an avenue to the most advantageous position for female power possible within this Victorian context.

The reactions of the rest of the family to the cousin marriages in *Elders and Betters* reflect both the acceptance of consanguineal relationships and the absurdity of exclusively intrafamilial marriages. It is taken for granted that there will be "no objection to the marriage of cousins" by the family (259). In fact, Benjamin gives Bernard his blessing to marry Tullia, saying, "I ask nothing better than to have my sister's daughter for my own" (287). Claribel's "objection" to the marriage of Anna and Terence is not due to any genuine source of concern, but rather the superficial disappointment that the first marriage of the family will be "spoilt by its not bringing any change!" (259). Anna herself acknowledges the effects of so much intermarrying, but does so somewhat nonchalantly, merely remarking: "We shall be simmering in a family

cauldron indeed” (287). Cousin marriage functions as a perfectly reasonable, though slightly amusing, mode of comportment for these sets of families, rather than genuinely incestuous acts. However, it is only through this mode of incest that the female characters, predominantly in subservient daughter roles, can advance their stations to secure a sense of control over their lives and the lives of their families.

Desirous Mothers and Loving Sons

While Victorian literature is rife with depictions of sibling relationships and cousin marriages, portrayals of mother and son incest are much less abundant. Jenny DiPlacidi has identified Gothic literature as the primary genre to contemplate on mother-son relationships, particularly through the Gothic’s reliance on tropes of “unnatural” or “monstrous” mothers. Though the purview of her work is centered on distinctly Gothic texts, DiPlacidi’s analysis of nineteenth century conceptions of incestuous mothers remains pertinent to uncovering Compton-Burnett’s motivations for broaching this “taboo” topic in her novels. In “Queer Mothers: Female Sexual Agency and Male Victims,” DiPlacidi theorizes mother and son incest as a mode of disrupting both patriarchal ideals of maternal purity, and “heteronormativity’s restrictive models of sexuality” as enforced by Victorian social codes (DiPlacidi 248). Depicting mothers as capable of incest with their male children is equated to “representing mothers as capable of sexual aggression and holding positions of power,” and as a result, reveals male bodies as “vulnerable to aggression and capable of submission” (250). This particular mode of incest is an especially powerful challenge to the patriarchal system, “radically destabili[sing] the tradition of heteronormativity and conventional power dynamics that demand and naturalise male dominance and female submission” (250). The exhibition of female erotic desire, specifically deployed onto a son, represents a radical departure from Victorian ideas about women, motherhood, morality,

and acceptable family bonds, affording the mother in question a profoundly unique type of power.

Mother and Son (1955) illustrates an example of maternal incest as the catalyst for radical female power, through the ascendancy of a mother to the head of the family by virtue of a relationship with her son. In the novel, Miranda Hume presides as the matriarch of the Hume family, demanding all other members defer to her desires and emotions. Her husband Julius' attempts to assert his authority as head of the household are rendered impotent, as Miranda consistently dismisses and manipulates him. However, Miranda's authoritative position is only cemented through her relationship with her son, Rosebery. In the beginning of the novel, the reader even has great difficulty discerning whether Rosebery is Miranda's son or husband due to the emotional closeness between the two. The incestuous nature of Rosebery and Miranda's relationship is largely accepted within the household's walls, even though it precludes Julius from filling the role of Miranda's companion, and excludes the other children taken in by the Humes—Alice, Francis, and Adrian—from Miranda's motherly love and affection. For Miranda, "It was the meaning of her life that Rosebery should belong to herself," and the dynamic between them is described as "vibrat[ing with] an active emotion, that the children took for granted, and Julius met with dry acceptance" (*Mother and Son* 16). Miranda utilizes this hold she has cultivated by doting on Rosebery in order to exploit him for her own ends. Rosebery acts not only as Miranda's favorite, but also as her constant defender against Julius' attempts to assert his authority over the finances, decisions, and everyday occurrences of the house. Through Rosebery's blind adoration of his mother, Miranda is able to employ him as a means of protecting her position as the matriarch.

Even so, the incestuous relationship between Miranda and Rosebery is a symbiotic one—Rosebery benefits from it almost as much as his mother does. Rosebery lives a life of leisure, never expected to pursue a career or even move out to begin a life or a family of his own. He exhibits no interest in looking elsewhere for female companionship, even though he is an adult of marrying age. He is resistant when pressed on the question of marriage, describing himself as “faithful to the one woman, and that one who fills the earliest memories” (14). Even the children are cognizant of Miranda’s hold over Rosebery, referring to him as “Rosebud” and continually prodding him about his plans for marriage. They often discuss his strange habits around Miranda amongst themselves, with remarks such as “Rosebud opens the door for Aunt Miranda, as if it were the first time in his life” (24) and “it is strange that she and Rosebery like each other when no one else likes either of them” (29). Just as incest affords Miranda the ability to serve in the traditionally male role of leader of the family, Rosebery’s relationship with his mother allows him the freedom to refuse marriage, avoid work, and hold to the promise of inheriting Miranda’s fortune after her death. Miranda and Rosebery continue their relationship with the knowledge that their individual agencies depend upon it.

Even in death, Miranda’s relationship with Rosebery secures her authority over the family. Neither her husband Julius nor her son Rosebery are able to extricate themselves from the sense of Miranda watching over and judging their actions. Both men contemplate marriage, but both potential engagements are called off. Rosebery feels his mother’s presence throughout his engagement to Miss Burke, so much so that he says, “I have shrunk from the thought of putting anyone between us” (196). Julius is also left alone when a potential new wife rejects him in favor of living with two female companions. For Miranda, her status in the home rests on her ability to maintain perfect control over the men in her life—men whose roles, by Victorian

standards, should grant them the potential to domineer over her. An intimate relationship with her son is the only mechanism radical enough for Miranda to successfully transcend these male-female power dynamics imposed by the family.

Queer Deidealization

These novels present uncomfortable realities about the nature of interfamily relationships. Women pursue the security of marrying a cousin in the hopes that they will be able to continue manipulating the family system they have become familiar with. Siblings who have clung to one another since childhood as a method of coping with family pressures find difficulty redirecting their affections outside the family. A mother pursues a relationship with her son in an effort to resist prescribed notions about motherhood and wifehood. All of these emotional and sexual attachments operate outside of the normative, but it is precisely their deviancy that creates the potential for characters to circumvent the family situations that otherwise render them bereft of power over their own existence. Even so, it is important to resist the temptation to idealize Compton-Burnett's use of incestuous relationships in her work as utopian alternatives to the patriarchal family structure. Analysis of Compton-Burnett's literary use of incest in this way contributes to the recent shift in queer studies in the form of a turn away from idealizing all queer relations as inherently liberatory and unproblematic. Kadji Amin has written on this turn in the field, emphasizing the importance of resisting the urge to make all queer narratives utopian. In his 2017 book, *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History*, Amin posits a mode of conducting queer studies that centers around "deidealization." For Amin, queer intimacies should not be romanticized, as they "are as likely to produce abuse, exploitation, and the renunciation of care as more loving, sexually liberated, and just alternatives to heteronormative social forms" (Amin 7). Amin critiques the tendency of queer studies scholars

to abandon the study of queer narratives with unsettling realities, saying “scholars too often compensate by switching gears from idealization to critique, flaying the object for its failure to be sufficiently transgressive or consistently radical” (9). However, the failure to fully take up these troublesome objects of study precludes the field from progressing toward a broader understanding of the challenges around politicizing queer narratives. Instead, “politicized scholarship needs to cultivate a wider set of methods and tactics with which to negotiate what disturbs and disappoints” (9). This study of incest in Compton-Burnett utilizes Amin’s method of deidealization, which seeks to “deexceptionaliz[e] queerness in order to analyze queer possibility as inextricable from relations of power, queer deviance as intertwined with normativity, and queer alternatives as not necessarily just alternatives” (10). Rather than idealize Compton-Burnett’s use of incestuous relationships as a practicable and preferable opposition to participation in the heteronormative family structure, I want to emphasize the inevitable pitfalls of incest in her novels. By rejecting prescribed gender roles and appropriate relations with family members, Compton-Burnett’s characters do not automatically find the liberation they hope for. Instead, her treatment of incest further reveals the utter lack of agency found within a heteronormative social system. Through the subversion of familial roles, Compton-Burnett investigates the potential these modes of affiliation provide to disempowered individuals to challenge authority and hierarchy, but the nature of these affiliations themselves are not entirely devoid of their own problematic tendencies and failures. Even these redefined relationships cannot thrive in the repressive, Victorian structure illustrated by Compton-Burnett’s fiction.

QUEER CAMP MOTHERS AND CHILDREN

The role of women and children in the heteronormative family is continually called into question by Ivy Compton-Burnett’s works. Her novels examine the role of mothers—a topic

female writers have explored throughout the history of women's writing—but through a separate and particularly strange set of strategies. Through the varying types of outlandish motherly dynamics put forth in her fiction, Compton-Burnett foregrounds the excess and absurdity of the domestic family structure, utilizing camp humor not only to negotiate the trauma and melancholy encapsulated by these dysfunctional family systems, but also to critique the systems themselves by emphasizing their ludicrous nature and farcical failures.

Much of the writing by women at the fin-de-siècle that broached or challenged maternal ideals emerged out of the ideology of the “New Woman” movement. This “angel in the house” discourse on motherhood—the heralding of women as morally superior domestic angels with the responsibility of exerting this feminine morality over their husband, children, and household staff—was challenged by women writers who reconceptualized motherhood in feminist terms. Angelique Richardson has written about New Woman authors such as Mona Caird, whose “writings expose Victorian motherhood as riddled with oppressive laws and ideologies” (Richardson 212). Richardson charts Caird, along with George Egerton and Sarah Grand, as prominent New Woman novelists emerging in the wake of the debate over women's issues such as suffrage, education, and property ownership. The New Woman novel functioned as a grave and sincere critique of the repugnance of traditional Victorian marriage, calling women to re-envision their roles as wives and mothers through a feminist ideology. While the “Woman Question” and New Woman fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century certainly influenced Ivy Compton-Burnett, her critique of women's roles and motherhood positions itself as indebted to a radically different tradition than these early forms of feminist fiction. Her outrageous and comedic depictions of the family do not allow for the deep pain and empathy on the part of the reader that fiction written to portray the oppression of women often demands.

Compton-Burnett's treatment of motherhood is more closely aligned with the satirical humor of late-nineteenth century Decadence, critiquing notions of pious, self-sacrificial, Victorian maternity through a queer camp aesthetic. Compton-Burnett's treatment of mothers works to redefine the notion of the nuclear family through the comic portrayal of transgressive motherhood that fails to uphold this maternal ideal. The excess and hilarity she deploys links Compton-Burnett to a Wildean tradition of queer, Decadent, camp writing that utilizes humor to negotiate tyrannical social structures. Instead of crafting conventional, realist plots to discuss the abuses inflicted on women and children by the hierarchical structure of the Victorian family, Compton-Burnett constructs stories whose bizarre comedy dispels the cogency of this institution altogether.

Queer camp scholars have written on the utilization of camp humor within fiction as a means of resisting the tyrannical powers upheld by societal structures. Kristin Mahoney has written about camp aesthetics as a mode of critiquing "inequality by enacting exaggerated, near ridiculous scenes of hierarchy and injustice" (Mahoney 163). Read through this framework, the use of camp humor can illuminate the way Compton-Burnett's novels may "emerge as thoughtful and playful responses to the experience of hardship, oppression, and invisibility" found within the family (174). In fact, much of the scholarly work that exists on Ivy Compton-Burnett has identified the role of camp humor in underscoring what Mahoney calls "the arbitrariness and constructedness of ... social roles" (174). In the following section, I argue that camp humor is deployed especially through Compton-Burnett's depictions of the mother figure. Instead of promoting a feminist kind of resistance to the idealized Victorian mother figure through realism and sincerity, Compton-Burnett's portrayal of mothers through the lens of queer

camp humor draws attention to the laughable failure of the patriarchal family structure and the roles it requires of women and children.

“Too Much” Motherhood

Ivy Compton-Burnett’s novels are filled with mothers who fail to fulfill the unrealistic expectations of the Victorian maternal ideal. Whether through untimely death or overtly dramatized suicide, the mother figures in her work find that they simply cannot live underneath the conditions instated by the expectations placed on mothers in heteronormative, upper-class families. However, it is through Compton-Burnett’s ability to take what should be tragic circumstances and exaggerate them to the point of comedy that her camp critique of these family systems and the maternal ideal is successful.

In *A House and its Head*, the agonizing dynamic between Ellen Edgeworth and her tyrannical husband Duncan foreshadows Ellen’s death that occurs early in the novel. The iconic opening of the book illustrates Duncan’s subtle, yet nevertheless cruel abuses toward his wife in a particularly absurd and undeniably humorous fashion:

“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.” (*A House and its Head* 3-4)

The camp humor of this dialogue, or lack of dialogue, is centered around Duncan’s adept ability to ignore his wife. The tension between Duncan’s desire to render his wife mutable and his petulant insistence on her performance as ideal wife and mother appears throughout their interactions, revealing the preposterous nature of Duncan’s beliefs about the role of women in the family system. Though infuriated by her attempts at conversation, Duncan will accept

nothing less than what he perceives to be the perfect fulfillment of her motherly and wifely duties. Sos Eltis has written about the inescapable campness of Duncan and Ellen's relationship in the novel, noting that:

“Duncan drags his frail wife from her deathbed in order that the proper family unity may be preserved at the breakfast table and then assuages the feeling of guilt that follows by framing himself retrospectively as a perfect husband, while his daughters and nephew assess his performance with humorous irony.” (Eltis 226)

As is common in many of Compton-Burnett's novels, the characters in *A House and its Head* respond to “the enormity of events” (227) such as Ellen's death through a “narrative of calm detachment” (226). Her death is not regarded as a tragedy would be in a realist novel, nor are the implications of her death analogous to the similar trope that appears throughout Victorian fiction, as explored by scholars such as Carolyn Dever. Compton-Burnett subverts the “loss of the mother” that appears as a narrative device in Victorian fiction and “creates a mystery for [the] child to solve, motivating time and again the redefinition—in the absence of role models—of female decorum, gender roles, and sexuality” (Dever xi). Instead, Ellen's death is regarded with what Eltis refers to as “apparent carelessness, evading and disarming explicit moral judgement,” and her role as wife and mother is filled almost immediately with Duncan's subsequent remarriage (Eltis 227). Through the nonchalance with which her death is met, Ellen does not fulfill what Dever identifies as the trope of the “beautiful, middle-class, repentant, misguided martyr-figures separated from their children by some circumstantial tragedy of dread-wasting disease” that works to represent the mother “in those structures of gender and desire shaped with reference to her disembodied ideal” in Victorian fiction (Dever 6). Rather, Compton-Burnett deploys a camp exaggeration of the disposability of the mother figure in the traditional family, while also illustrating the extent of the absurd norms that make the survival of the mother in the domestic realm utterly impossible.

In *Elders and Betters*, Compton-Burnett poses another camp representation of the failure of the mother figure to inhabit the maternal ideal through the character of Jessica Calderon. Through her frequent and dramatized confessions to her children such as “I am not a happy person for you to have as a mother,” Compton-Burnett foregrounds the absurd ideologies about motherhood which reign in such a restrictive society (*Elders and Betters* 56). Eltis has written that much of the “undeniable campness running through Compton-Burnett’s novels” appears in the creation of characters who are “self-performers” (Eltis 226). Eltis posits that in these novels “everyone is, to some degree, creating, projecting, or preserving a role for him- or herself; the crucial difference is between those who do so knowingly and those who are dangerously unaware and who believe in their own creations” (226-227). Jessica’s warnings to her children to “never think her example is one to follow,” reveal that she is the latter, believing wholeheartedly in her own performance of the role of a failing mother (*Elders and Betters* 144). As Eltis writes, “the most destructive characters in many of the novels are those who fail to understand life-as-playing-a-role, becoming absorbed instead in the idea of their emotional sincerity and the inevitability of their feelings” (Eltis 227). Eltis’ reference to Sontag’s famed 1964 essay “Notes on Camp” here is especially apt, as Sontag identifies camp as “Being-as-playing-a-role,” or “the metaphor of life as theater” (Sontag 519). Sontag, who cites Ivy Compton-Burnett as one of the “Random examples of items which are part of the canon of camp” early in the essay, posits that camp “responds particularly to the markedly attenuated and to the strongly exaggerated” (Sontag 517-518). For Sontag, and for Compton-Burnett, a successful deployment of a camp sensibility’s “essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails” (Sontag 522). While Jessica takes her niece Anna’s accusations about her failure as a mother entirely seriously, to the reader this seriousness fails. These attacks are so exaggerated, so dramatized, that they are simply too much

for us to regard with much sincerity. Thus, we cannot accept them as sincere expression of emotions, but as constructed, overtly dramatized performances. However, both Anna and Jessica believe their own self-performances, rendering the scene as unknowingly camp rather than exhibiting an ironic self-awareness. The scene “camps” the way both women utterly subscribe to the notion of ideal motherhood, and their belief in Jessica’s utter failure to satisfy such an ideal. Anna ventures to tear down Jessica’s entire sense of self, as well as her identity as a mother, with such accusations as:

“I have now constituted myself general observer and overseer of your household. And what a word; baleful! It shows that you know the exact essence of your spell. Why don’t you stop working it, Aunt Jessica, and try to be a natural, wholesome woman?” (*Elders and Betters* 200)

Through the extravagance and absurdity of such attacks, Compton-Burnett succeeds, by Sontag’s standards, in the achievement of camp through a story that “cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is ‘too much’” (Sontag 523). Jessica’s perceived failure to be a good mother serves not to provoke the sympathies of the reader, but rather to justify the discarding of the social structure that creates such an absurd maternal ideal in the first place.

The peculiar and humorous depictions of mothers Compton-Burnett makes use of are no less political than her depictions of incestuous relationships. She continues to perform a critique of the patriarchal family system, but through the depiction of excessive maternal figures, thereby engaging in political critique through a camp aesthetic that allows readers to laugh at the excess of the Edwardian domestic sphere. As Eltis writes, the campness of Compton-Burnett’s characters “is a means of evading and challenging hostile ideologies—most significantly heterosexual social conformity and the suffocating demands of the family” (Eltis 229). Through the depiction of mothers who consistently fail to perform what they conceive of as ideal motherhood, Compton-Burnett illustrates the impossible nature of such an ideal.

“Are We Children or Are We Not?”

With the failures of mother figures brought to the forefront of Compton-Burnett’s works, the children in her novels are often portrayed as having an almost uncanny adult wisdom, with the lack of a successful maternal presence to guide them often forcing them to have to raise themselves. The role of children throughout Ivy Compton-Burnett’s novels functions as a satirical microcosm of the social structures inhabited by her adult characters. The children in Compton-Burnett’s fiction fashion their own hierarchical structures among each other, structures that are remarkably similar to the systems upheld by their elder family members. In spite of their age, they are witty and worldly, seeming to possess some foreknowledge of the misfortunes their families will encounter, while being utterly resigned to the consequences. Hillary Spurling has theorized about the role of children in Compton-Burnett’s fictional worlds, noting that few novelists “Have portrayed them on such absolutely equal terms as being no less intelligent than grown-ups” (Spurling 50). Spurling also notes the children’s performance of conventional family structures depicts their adult family members as “fickle, careless, remote and incalculable giants” (50). Compton-Burnett’s children reveal the absurdity of the family systems at work, and also the failure of the adults in these families to parent successfully. Examination of the darkly comedic children in Compton-Burnett’s novels is illustrative of the kind of camp vision of the patriarchal family structure she pursues through her fiction.

Theodora and Julius Calderon, the youngest characters in *Elders and Betters*, are especially enlightening as to the humorous role children play as wholly separate observers of the chaos of their adult family members. They are described as looking “sound in body and mind, but a little aloof and mature for their years, as if they steered their own way through a heedless world” (*Elders and Betters* 47). Despite the death, duplicity, and dramatics surrounding them,

the children create and maintain their own separate universe. With the general attitude toward the children being “that their amusement was their own affair,” Theodora and Julius occupy themselves with religious rituals held in the backyard, complete with prayers to a god of their own creation by the name of “Chung” (49). The reader is first introduced to the children and their “Chinese temple” soon after their cousins, the Donnes, have moved in nearby:

“‘Oh Great and good and powerful god, Chung,’ said Theodora Calderon, on her knees before a rock in the garden, ‘protect us, we beseech thee, in the new life that is upon us. For strangers threaten our peace, and the hordes of the alien draw nigh. Keep us in thy sight, and save us from the dangers that beset our path. For Sung Li’s sake, amen.’” (46)

Camp humor here is pronounced through the use of “strangers” and “hordes of the alien” that Theodora uses to describe her own cousins. Their religion mimics tropes the children have no doubt learned from their required attendance in church, agreeing that Sung Li is “enough like Son and yet not too much like it,” and justifying their biblical references by saying “we did not take the real names, only made up some that were like them” (47). This constructed religious system parodies the strict rules and codes of piety Theodora and Julius must contend with as members of an elite, religious, Edwardian society.

Their Chinese temple is not the only space in which Theodora and Julius fashion themselves as self-performers. Eltis posits that their religion functions as a site of “freedom from their imposed performance of childish naiveté,” that must be upheld when brought out of their own sphere and into the family sphere (Eltis 227). Through their performance of innocence and the subsequent treatment of them by their family members “as an outlet for adult emotions,” Theodora and Julius camp childhood by performing it (Spurling 100). Both the children’s self-awareness of this phenomenon and the continued ignorance of their adult family members is particularly humorous, as when Julius himself postulates that “Children should not be used for

the outlet of grown-up people's guilty feelings. What have we to do with their remorse? It is the due reward of their deeds" (*Elders and Betters* 147). When this prescient remark is met with laughter from his sister Dora, Jessica overhears her daughter's Dora's laugh and assumes "that a childish mood had supervened" (147). Compton-Burnett utilizes the self-awareness of these child characters to illustrate the absurdity of the structure that forces them into a staging of childhood. The children are aware of the bizarre nature of their family situation, agreeing that "Verily we are having a unique childhood" (247). Indeed, even when their mother dies, they do not respond with the authentic grief or distress one might expect, but rather they cannot help but laugh:

"Julius and Dora broke into laughter, continued it with more abandonment for their repression, looked for their mother's reproof and fell into silence, realizing that she was gone from their lives, as their deportment was uncontrolled on the occasion of her death" (240)

Spurling notes the frequency with which Compton-Burnett utilizes this trope in her novels, saying "Outbursts of nervous laughter, sharply checked in the presence of adults and exploding in hysterical reaction behind their backs, come again and again in I. Compton-Burnett's accounts of children subjected to emotional pressure beyond their bearing" (Spurling 104). When their behavior is chided by their family members, however, Julius is exacerbated, demanding "with increasing violence, 'Are we children or are we not? Are we likely to have the ways of a man and woman, or are we not?'" (*Elders and Betters* 356). The manner with which the children conduct themselves within the family structure is never appropriate—they must perform childishness for fear of not being childish enough, but yet authentic childlike responses such as uncontrolled laughter are not permitted. Like the child characters, the reader cannot help but find the absurd camp depictions of these family dramas utterly ridiculous.

CONCLUSION

In *Mother and Son*, Compton-Burnett's characters engage in discussion over the role of tragedy and comedy, and the relationship between the two:

“‘So it is true that comedy and tragedy are mingled,’ said Adrian.
‘Really it is all tragedy,’ said his sister. ‘Comedy is a wicked way of looking at it, when it is not our own.’
‘Is that why people cannot laugh at themselves?’ said Julius.
‘This last trouble was all our own,’ said Adrian.
‘Yes, and it was all tragedy,’ said Alice. ‘What really good person could have a sense of humour?’” (35-36)

This scene encapsulates much of what Compton-Burnett is up to in her fiction as she seeks to expose the tragedy imposed by the family system, while also portraying it as absurd and supremely funny. The tragedy that drives family members to construct incestuous kinship structures is evidenced by the fact that these relationships are a desperate grasp for control in a system that renders all of those outside of the role of the head of the household utterly dependent and powerless. The mothers in her fiction conceive of themselves as tragic failures when they place themselves up against an unachievable ideal of motherhood demanded by pervasive Victorian social codes. Still, though, Compton-Burnett's project is not to force readers to linger in these tragic circumstances, but rather to teach us to laugh at ourselves and our attachments to the silly requirements and unrealistic expectations imposed by restrictive social codes. This laughter is also highly reparative, as it functions as a way of distancing oneself from the trauma inflicted by the family in an effort to encounter it objectively.

Compton-Burnett's humorous manner of writing about such a weighty topic as the harm fostered by institution of the family serves as a radical political move—she laughs the institution off the stage, inviting us to laugh with her. In doing so, her novels demand a critical investigation of the family as a reflection of a society that claims to be progressive. Through her stories, it is

clear that even a society which calls itself “modern” is still largely adhering to antiquated codes of behavior. As she brings both the Victorian family dynamic and the Decadent queer camp aesthetic into the modern moment, Ivy Compton-Burnett sets herself apart from most modernist writers—both those highly canonized, male writers who disregard gender issues and power disparities in their critique of social institutions, but also feminist modernist writers who require a level of solemnity in their depictions of injustice. Compton-Burnett illustrates that political writing—even queer and feminist writing—can still be humorous, and perhaps that it is this humorous quality which captivates readers to the point of serious engagement. Through these elements of her fiction, Compton-Burnett offers up an alternate way of conceiving of the political project of modernism, as well as expanding the rigid definition of what constitutes modernist writing. Critical engagement with Ivy Compton-Burnett and her strange, scathing, and hilarious depictions of the family has the capacity to be transformative to the field of modernist studies.

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