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“Dangerous Decade: Explorations of Self and Womanhood in Rose Macaulay’s *Dangerous Ages* and Elizabeth Cambridge’s *Hostages to Fortune*.”

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Forty is a dangerous age for a woman. It is the age at which, in 1921, Rose Macaulay publishes the novel in which she explores the life she might have had if she had married and had children, and questions whether her singleton pursuit of mere intellectual fulfilment has been worth it. In 1933 it is the age at which Elizabeth Cambridge, another intelligent popular novelist of the day, publishes the story of a life like her own, in which a mother’s sense of self is sublimated, suffused into children and domesticity, her own longing to write suppressed. “Is that all?” her character Catherine asks (*HTF* p.291), suddenly appalled at her lack of material achievement, wondering if she too has made the right choice.

Novels of middle-aged writers, written in the peculiar “middle age” of the between the wars years, *Dangerous Ages* and *Hostages to Fortune* make important statements about female lives in the 1920s and 30s. Rubbing shoulders with each other on public library shelves, perhaps borrowed, we might imagine, by *Brief Encounter’s* Laura Jesson on one of her Thursday shopping trips to Milford, these novels share the same idiom of anxiety about how women should fill their time. Contemporary female readers would respond with sympathy to Rose Macaulay’s Neville Bendish as she frets herself to the point of illness over the question of “how to be useful though married” (*DA* p.10), and empathise with Cambridge’s Catherine who also “wanted to be sure she was of some use in the world” (*HTF* p.171). Similar in their preoccupations and terms of reference, written in the dangerous age in which Willa Muir puzzled over the different creativities of men and women in *Women: an Enquiry*, and Virginia Woolf lectured to the women of Newnham and Girton about the necessity of having a room of one’s own, these are novels of crisis.¹ Here intelligent women writers allow their characters to investigate the conundrums of the

¹ Willa Muir, *Women: an Inquiry* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925); Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929).

female condition and consider the value of their own lives. Can the achievement of children be considered enough for a fulfilled existence? *Is that all?*

Both novels announce their themes in their initial sequences and open on images of birth. Neville rises early on the June morning of her forty-third birthday, and makes her way from house to garden, where she enjoys an invigorating dip in the cool water of the “deep little stream” (*DA* p.3). She emerges from the water fresh with determination to start a new life - she will resume the medical studies she abandoned years ago on her marriage to Rodney, and will cudgel her brain, “squandered, atrophied, gone soft with disuse” back to fitness (*DA* p.6). The imagery proposes the birth of a new self, a return to an egocentric concentration on the development of her own mind and skills, a reining in of the selflessness and empathetic engagement with the lives of others which has underpinned her motherhood role. Yet the scene is complicated with metaphors which confound the apparently simple dynamics of that birth. On her way to the stream Neville moves through a kitchen “blue with china” (*DA* p.2) and through woodland carpeted with bluebell patches. She returns from her swim to dress “in blue cotton” (*DA* p.9). The insistent blueness – traditionally Mary’s colour – confirms Neville’s continuing maternity, a role that will never be sloughed off. The waters in the “cold, clear, swirling pool” (*DA* p.3) in which she swims are “in one part, out of her depth” (*DA* p.3) and she emerges from her dip not to pure birthday happiness, but to worry about her own abilities, anxieties about old age, and envy of her husband’s and children’s chances in life – the birth of the restored self which she longs for is dangerous, incomplete, ultimately aborted.

Hostages to Fortune opens, too, on a June morning birth. Catherine’s daughter Audrey is delivered and briskly bathed by the nurse, while her mother rests her tired body, feeling “as if she’d just dragged herself ashore, breathless, from swimming in a rough sea” (*HTF* p.5). Difficulty is immediately attendant on this birth also, for the baby is “A girl. An anti-climax. A girl...after all that!” (*HTF* p.3) The central preoccupations of the novel are apparent in its opening paragraphs – what is there for a girl to do? What can her life consist of? The spectre of superfluosity haunts the women of both these post-war novels. We are reminded of Gerda Bendish’s remark to her mother that “Penelope’s baby’s come, by the way. A girl. Another superfluous woman” (*DA* p.12). Against this background of perceived redundancy, every woman’s quest for usefulness is both poignant and urgent. Quick to emerge, too, in the initial scenes of *Hostages to Fortune* are the tensions we have noted in the opening images of *Dangerous Ages* between the

mother's satisfaction in maternal fulfilment, and her own strong urge somehow to preserve a sense of self. Recovering from the birth, Catherine sits "re-trimming a hat with a piece of lace, some dark green tulle and a pink rose" (*HTF* p.6). Tersely and ambivalently emblematic, the rose resonates at once with both Catherine's contentment at having given birth, and with her desire to produce the pretty hat which will confirm her continuing sense of well-dressed, confident individuality.

We are struck, too, by the similarity of structure of both novels. Both authors create trees of intergenerational family connections through which to explore the possible lives open to women. In Rose Macaulay's narrative, a whole range of hypothetical destinies is fanned out before the reader. Eighty-four year-old Grandmamma enjoys the secure wisdom of old-age while her daughter, sixty-four year-old Mrs Hilary, is miserable in her lumpen egocentricity. Neville herself is tense with the need to establish a sense of self, while her sister Nan, busy with her writing, is increasingly aware that marriage to Barry Briscoe would bring her real happiness. The other sister, Pamela, enjoys a comfortable social-working life with her companion Frances Carr, untroubled by the anxieties and conflicts engendered by engagement with the opposite sex, while Neville's daughter Gerda (sister of Kay), is the carefree artist and poet who looks with cool desire at her aunt's lover and decides she must have him. Elizabeth Cambridge draws a similarly multi-branched family tree. Catherine's life is compared to that of her elder sister Violet, as are those of their boy/girl pairs of children, Audrey and Adam, Jane and Sebastian. Mother's help Irene is an interesting addition to this tree, and we watch her carve her way carefully towards the better post and possibility of marriage which are her aspirations.

Commentators have always been quick to suggest aspects of Rose Macaulay herself in the characters of *Dangerous Ages*. We know that circumstances in her own life at the time of writing would have made her acutely aware of issues of female sexuality, marriage, and the possibility of children. Her relationship with married Gerald O'Donovan was clearly of central importance by this stage – she has already in 1919 published *What Not*, in which she has fun with the idea of prohibited marriages, and illicit births, and in which the heroine Kitty Grammont muses, "It's queer, isn't it, how strong it is, this odd, desperate wanting of one person out of all the world" (*WN* p.169). Yet while *What Not* was an intellectual sketch of the dilemma in which she found herself with Gerald, offering satire as the light-touch, sardonic solution to the difficulty, *Dangerous Ages*, written in the autumn of 1920 when Gerald, with his wife and children, was away in Italy on a diplomatic mission, is strikingly

different in tone. Richer, subtler, more insightful, this novel more than any other seems to be Rose Macaulay's way of "having it all." In *Neville* she sketches out the life she could have had if she had surrendered to the demands of husband and children, sacrificing her prized sharpness of intellect. In *Nan* she writes out the self which yearns contrarily for traditional marriage, perhaps to an ideal man like Barry Briscoe who values imagination in love. (*DA* p.144). In *Nan*, too, however, we see the woman thwarted in that aim, settling with tears and determination for the second best of an adulterous long-term relationship with Stephen Lumley, making the most of the freedom it will give her to continue with her writing. In *Gerda* she realises the strong woman who will take the man she wants, even against the rules, while in *Pamela* she offers the detached self which might ultimately find it best to relinquish the struggle, training both heart and mind not to care – "I certainly don't see quite what all the fuss is about..." (*DA* p.270).

Elizabeth Cambridge, too, enjoys investigating the various lives of her female characters. *Hostages to Fortune* is the story of a doctor's wife who, with her husband William, struggles to bring up her family in rural Oxfordshire in the straitened economic conditions following World War I. From the start, Catherine's messy, difficult, financially restricted life is compared with that of her competent sister Violet. Violet "had married younger and more wisely, and looked upon Catherine's marriage as a cheap caricature of everything that marriage ought to be" (*HTF* p.7). Her children Sebastian and Jane "were handsome, healthy, vigorous creatures, with sound teeth and excellent digestions" (*HTF* p.8). For Violet at first, life is comfortable, moneyed, easy, as she invests all her energies in her shiny home, respectable professional husband and well-polished children. By the end, however, all has fallen away. Husband Edward abandons the job he hates and insists on moving to a shoddily built house in a distinctly unidealistic Cornwall. Both children leave home to pursue marriage and careers, leaving their parents desolate, unable to understand that they do not own these offspring in whom they have invested so much. ("They're not grateful. They just walk off and leave us. As if we didn't count" (*HTF* p. 103)). The career path of Catherine's niece Jane is also held up for scrutiny. Having fought for and secured a demanding job as a eurhythmics teacher, she is taken advantage of by a parasitic husband who lives off her earnings and eventually abandons her. Exhausted and disillusioned, she opts in the end for a quiet life as the kept companion of her rich parents-in-law.

Like any good mother, Catherine worries constantly about life options for her daughter Audrey. She knows she needs to make arrangements for her education, reminding her husband when the baby is only a few months old that they ought to take out a school policy. "William thought they were spending quite enough. He promised to look into it later... He'd see about it presently." (*HTF* p.15). Even when it *is* achieved, a girl's schooling is likely to be less than satisfactory, Catherine recognises.

"After all the talk of new careers for women the bulk of them still had to choose the three old professions of nursing, secretaryship and teaching. She wondered a little about Audrey. A beautiful vagueness still existed in the minds of headmistresses as to what their pupils were to do when they left school. Their responsibilities ceased with matriculation." (*HTF* p.249)

The job market for women is haphazard, difficult, unfair. "I think it's rotten, being a girl," says Audrey. "You can't begin low down in your job and work up. Where you begin, there you stop..." Cambridge catches the impatience and frustration of these girls of the younger generation who are desperate to be "doing," to be proving their use in the world, but who are made to wait in the side-lines, marking time in dead-end jobs till marriage presents itself. Why, Audrey wonders hadn't her parents and cousins done more with their opportunities, "Why were Catherine's generation content with such shabby lives?...There was the whole world to run at, full of marvellous things to do, to see, to acquire. If only you had enough courage...If only you wanted them enough..." (*HTF* p.288). Yet even she, she recognises, will be content in the end with marriage, which, "all things considered, had its points. It was more permanent than most careers, and more various. She meant to have a life of her own, to keep herself and be independent, that came first. Only if it ever came to marriage, she wouldn't feel that she was being called upon to make a sacrifice" (*HTF* p.257-8). In a turn of phrase strikingly reminiscent of Pamela Hilary's at the end of *Dangerous Ages*, Audrey considers that this is "another thing about which too much fuss was made." (*HTF* p.258) "It wasn't in Audrey's character to make too much fuss." (*HTF* p.257).

It is, of course, with Catherine's own life choices that *Hostages to Fortune* is most importantly concerned. Like Neville in *Dangerous Ages*, who recognises that her precious Kay and Gerda are "of enormous importance; the most important things in life...only not everything" (*DA* p.7), Catherine knows that she has needs beyond home and children

which must be satisfied. “For more than anything else, more than William and Audrey, Catherine loved ink.” (*HTF* p.18). She is defined by her need to write, producing amid the chaos of her child-rearing commitments, “a long novel in the Wessex manner, full of strong-minded dark women and farms in lonely places and Nature and Destiny, and a great many other things which she knew nothing whatever about.” (*HTF* p.18). Her writing is achieved against severe practical odds.

“Other women had managed to write novels and bring up families. Catherine wondered if they had all washed behind their children’s ears and pushed them about in perambulators and swept under their beds and weeded the garden and picked the fruit and made their children’s clothes and done the hundred and one odd jobs that fell to her share...” (*HTF* p.114)

The publisher’s rejection of her novel is deeply wounding. Shutting the returned manuscript in a drawer, she walks out into the fields trying to come to terms with the pain. “‘Oh, God!’ she thought. ‘Help it not to hurt me. It’s foolish to be bitter. Teach me to put *that* into everything I do. Even into the things I hate doing...’” (*HTF* p.117). The moment throws into sharp relief the unresolvable conflict between her drive to write, and her desire to do motherhood well.

“Other women found their houses and their husbands and children enough, why couldn’t she be like them? Suppose she poured out all her energy, all her imagination upon them? She would be doing no more than she ought to do?...If only [God] would free her of the continual need to ‘tell’...to show...to create.” (*HTF* p.116).

In a moment of heart-rending humility, she is convinced, too, that she will never be able to write as well as she wants. “‘And if I could...could I ever create anything...show anything as good as Audrey and Adam?’” (*HTF* p. 118). Her lament is a striking echo of Neville’s as, recovering from the breakdown brought on by overwork, she regrets to her sister how odd it is to be a woman of forty-three with everything made comfortable for her “and her brain gone to pot and her work in the world done:”

“I want something to bite my teeth into – some solid, permanent job – and I get nothing but sweetmeats, and people point at Kay and Gerda and say, ‘That’s your work, and it’s over. Now you can rest, seeing that it’s good, like God on the seventh

day.'...But Pammie, dear, it's worse than I've said. I'm a low creature. I don't only want to do jobs that want doing: I want to count, to make a name. I'm damnably ambitious. You'll despise that, of course - and you're right, it is despicable. But there it is. Most men and many women are tormented by it – the itch for recognition.'" (*DA* p.211).

Women need more than children, both novels insist. They do not, after all, own the offspring they so painfully create. One of the many lucid beauties of *Hostages to Fortune* is its depiction of Catherine's gracious letting go of her brood, stepping back at the end of the book to let them enjoy their independence – "And now I must sit back...out of the way. Not grab nor claim, not try to insist on what they do and what they are.'" (*HTF* p.335).

The novels are unexpectedly linked, too, at an emotional level. Elizabeth Cambridge is by far the more sensuous of the two writers, her pages suffused with Catherine's sheer love for her husband and children, yet there are points in *Dangerous Ages* too where we find Rose Macaulay's sharp prose unusually sensitized by real emotions. Cambridge's story candidly proposes an account of real family struggles, a picture of a mother doggedly filling her children's days with activities, taking them for walks, teaching them to read, mending their clothes, making their meals, nursing her husband through influenza, or shopping with him on a snowy winter day for children's Christmas presents. It is a translucent tale of family dynamics in which characters ebb and flow in their relationships with one another, quarrelling and making up, pleasing and irritating, approaching and retreating, connecting and disconnecting. The clear, simple prose carries moments of emotional intensity, such as when Catherine looks at her toddler daughter and knows that "she loved Audrey, that was enough for the present." (*HTF* p.31). Rose Macaulay proposes a story considerably more cerebral, carried largely by characters' conversations and by prose clever with imagery and allusion. Yet we have a sense for the first time in this interesting eleventh novel of real family relationships, as convincing in their way as Elizabeth Cambridge's. It does seem that in *Dangerous Ages* Rose Macaulay has at last achieved characters "as they are" and engaged with real issues in a way she has not done before. Clumsy Mrs Hilary's moment of mother-love as she reaches out to comfort her broken-hearted daughter is as vibrant as Catherine's as she contemplates Audrey, though it takes more words:

"My little girl – Nan!"

'Mother...'

They held each other close. It was a queer moment, though not an unprecedented one in the stormy history of their relations together. A queer, strange, comforting, healing moment, the fleeting shadow of a great rock in a barren land; a strayed fragment of something which should have been between them always but was not. Certainly an odd moment....and it could not last." (*DA* p.254).

Complex, insightful, emotional, it is perhaps a moment drawn from its author's difficult relationship with her own mother. Both authors, too, do adult love well. Cambridge's Catherine describes the love which has cemented her good, enduring marriage, in language as limpid and prosaic as a rock-pool:

"There had been a period at which William's loudly declared opinions, William's habits...the very way in which he had poked a fire or opened a letter or blown his nose...had irritated her to the point of screaming. That was the point, she supposed, looking down the hot garden, at which most marriages broke down.

Theirs had failed to break down for two good reasons, they both had to work hard and they were both, fundamentally, realists. Neither of them supposed that because marriage with one person had become irksome, marriage with another would automatically become the ideal state.

...Their marriage was something lasting, something which, for no very definite reason, she felt to be good, something far more than an arrangement which satisfied them both." (*HTF* p.308)

Rose Macaulay, too, is surprisingly able in *Dangerous Ages* to capture the exhilaration and complexity of real male-female relationships. Here is Nan comparing her feelings for the attractive Stephen Lumley on the one hand, and Barry Briscoe on the other. Nan and Stephen feel mutual liking, but "each left the other where they were,"

"Whereas Barry filled Nan, beneath her cynicism, beneath her levity, with something quite new – a queer desire, to put it simply, for goodness, for straight living and generous thinking, even, within reason, for usefulness. More and more he flooded her inmost being, drowning the old landmarks, like the sea at high tide. Nan was not a Christian, did not believe in God, but she came near at this time to believing in

Christianity as a life, that it might be a fine and adventurous thing to live.” (*DA* p.149)

Linguistically and stylistically, too, there are points at which these two novels unexpectedly intersect, creating resonances and suggesting a common pool of vocabulary and preoccupation. Rose Macaulay’s image-studded prose has been remarked on, and the reader has become adept at interpreting her iconographical subtext – the blue flowers attendant on Neville’s morning swim, the water representing new births, the spinning bicycle wheels recalling perpetual change, Pamela’s latch-key, heavy with its weight of Freudian sexual significance as it is inserted into the door of the rooms in Cow Lane which she shares with Frances Carr. Interestingly, we find that Elizabeth Cambridge can handle this metaphorical shorthand also, her touch gentle, the pictures seamlessly integrated into her text. Roses mean perfection, and moments of perfect fulfilment are quietly foregrounded by their presence – William “picked a couple of pink rambler roses off the front of the cottage, and put one into each of Audrey’s clutching hands. Audrey lay back, her toes curled up, her eyes bright and intent, looking up past William, past Catherine, at a spray of climbing rose which bobbed between her and the sky.” (*HTF* p.17). In both books bowls denote femininity, receptivity, and if we have noted the “sweet peas in a bowl” which are a focal feature in Pamela and Frances’ calm, feminine flat, we will be struck by the fact that Catherine sits shelling peas and putting them in a cradled bowl as she listens patiently to her sister mourning the fact that her children have grown up.

“William looked at the bowl of green peas in the crook of her arm.

‘Green peas!’ he said. That’s the stuff.’

He kissed her.

Catherine felt as they walked into the house that William loved her for all the things for which she didn’t want to be loved.” (*HTF* p.110).

Does she not, we wonder, want to be loved for what William regards as the typically feminine – calmness, passivity, the ability to respond patiently to everything life throws at her?

The fact that both novels end on a strangely complex note of passivity is worth remarking on as a final strand which binds them. *Dangerous Ages* seems to end twice, first with the

“hymn to tranquillity” of Chapter XVI, in which Grandmamma sits happily beating time to the Salvation Army band, and looking forward calmly to anything life or death can hold – “Time is dead,’ thought Grandmamma. ‘What next?’” (*DA* p.268), then with the even more determinedly settling coda of Pamela’s philosophy of disengagement in Chapter XVII - “Not Grandmamma’s and not Neville’s should be, after all, the last word, but Pamela’s.” (*DA* p.269). Pamela, famously, does not care to fuss. The final pages of *Hostages to Fortune* show, too, Catherine working herself down to a point of carefully schooled contentment. The children go; she is glad of the happy times she has had with them as they have been growing up, but she can do no more for them – they must choose their own paths; she will not even hope for happiness for them.

“She leaned, in the dusk, against the rough tweed of William’s sleeve and thought that at last, even that wish had left her and that it was beyond her, in such a world, to plan happiness for her children.

And with the loss of that, the last of her ambitions, she lay still, and was content.” (*HTF*p.335)

Yet we wonder if there is not something disingenuous about the quiet endings of these books. The tenor of the stories has been quite the opposite throughout. Women have fought and scabbled their way through the pages of both novels towards a sense of usefulness which has been in every case hard won. The note has been consistently of struggle, perseverance, determination and strength. The central drama of *Dangerous Ages* has been Nan’s passionate fight for marriage to Barry, the book’s predominant image the desperate cliff-top bicycle race in which Nan and Gerda vie for his favour. *Hostages to Fortune* has shown a mother driven to raise her children well, bringing them through poverty, illness, cold and difficulty to secure near-adulthood. For the authors to sidestep at the end into quiescence and detachment, leaving us with images of women somehow weakened by disengagement, is at some level disappointing, treacherous, even dangerous. We would rather have the strong women the main body of the novels champion, the ones who continue the fight.

The strong women are, of course, in the end the authors themselves. Rose Macaulay did continue her fight, committing herself to her twenty-five year relationship with Gerald and engaging with life in a way which enriched and invigorated her twelve subsequent novels. “It is stupid to think that just because I never cared to marry I have no experience of life,”

she is once reported to have said.² All her novels, from earliest to latest, attest that this “most prominent spinster in England” has had an experience of life which is wide-ranging, rich and intense.³ The woman who zestfully crammed her working day with activity – who took a daily swim in the Serpentine at the age of seventy-seven, who drove and cycled with more enthusiasm than care, who globe-trotted happily all her life and took her car alone through Portugal in her sixties, who greeted her many party invitations with delight, and whose time was crowded with friendships – made the most of her writing also. She writes in all possible genres – poetry, fiction, drama, history, travel prose, literary criticism – and piles the multiplicity of her ideas into a fifty-year writing career.

Although Catherine’s manuscript was returned by the publisher, her creator’s manuscripts were not, and Elizabeth Cambridge went on to write five more novels before her death in 1949. She has continued her love affair with ink, satisfied her passion for “showing” what she knows of life. The women of *The Sycamore Tree* (1934), *Susan and Joanna* (1935), and *Mrs Dufresne* (1940) are strong and capable like her first creation.

That both novels should end ambiguously is perhaps their strength. Closing in quietness and detachment, they challenge us to disagree. Surely the women of the 20s and 30s, reading these books in the awkward decade of their publication, would receive their endings with the same scepticism as ourselves, and be inspired not to acquiescence but to the continuing struggle - however dangerous - to define their usefulness? Like us they will have emerged from their reading of *Dangerous Ages* and *Hostages to Fortune* not with a sense of loss and anti-climax, but with the conviction that women’s lives do indeed have value. The books themselves, after all, are defiant proof of the usefulness of the two strong women who wrote them. Dangerously capable at the age of forty, they could *write*.

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² Quoted by Alan Pryce-Jones in “The Pleasures of Knowing Rose Macaulay,” *Encounter*, March 1959, rpt. In Constance Babington Smith, *Rose Macaulay*, (London: Collins, 1972), p. 226.

³ Quoted in Hilary Spurling, *Secrets of a Woman’s Heart: the Later Life of Ivy Compton-Burnett 1920-1969* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984), p. 135.