Suburban Sonnets: ‘Mrs Harwood’, Miriam Stone and Domestic Modernity

SUSAN SHERIDAN

In 1959 in Tasmania, an unknown poet called Gwen Harwood started a guerilla war on incompetent literary editors by sending out her poems under male pseudonyms. As she had suspected, poems by ‘Walter Lehmann’ and ‘Francis Geyer’ were more readily accepted than those from Mrs Harwood of Hobart. She intensified the hoax when, in 1961, she sent to the Bulletin Walter Lehmann’s pair of sonnets on the medieval lovers Abelard and Eloisa. They were published, and then revealed to read, acrostically, ‘So Long Bulletin. Fuck All Editors’. ‘Tas. Housewife in Hoax of Year’ screamed the headline in Truth newspaper, as the Bulletin issue was withdrawn and pulped, and the air was thick with outrage and threats of prosecution for obscenity.

This ‘Tas. housewife’ had been waging a war of words with other male editors and fellow poets for some time. She made frequent and often hilarious complaints to her friends about editors, telling stories about how they rejected poems she knew were good; or how they accepted and then lost poems; or kept them for months and then rejected them; or published them and neglected to send her the payment. This was the late 50s and early 60s, a period when poetry especially was thriving in Australia; but getting your poems published depended on catching the eye of one of a handful of editors – Douglas Stewart at the Bulletin, Clem Christesen of Meanjin, James McAuley of Quadrant, Kenneth Slessor of Southerly, Geoffrey Dutton and Max Harris of Australian Letters, and the editors of the annual Angus and Robertson anthology of poetry. Noting that the poems of her male pseudonyms are welcomed more warmly – and sometimes paid at a better rate – than her own, Harwood’s
complaint to her friend Tony Riddell is most acute about the way women are excluded from informal networks: ‘I am not able to buy Slessor a beer or do McAuley a good turn or offer Christesen anything but poetry which he allows editorial assistants to spit on’ (A Steady Storm of Correspondence, 119).

Clem Christesen, the long-time editor of Meanjin, became a particular bête noir for her.¹ He had published a number of Gwen Harwood poems, and in 1958 he accepted three more, praising the one called ‘Memento Homo’ as ‘the most strikingly original and the least personal.’² A year later, however, he returned this highly-praised but still unpublished poem, without comment, saying that he would hold a different poem, ‘Anniversary’, for publication in Autumn, 1960. Harwood was furious. She wrote to him: ‘In another note this week you asked: “What do you need? Encouragement?” I think I need consistent judgement.’³

At the same time she sent, apparently in belated response to his request for ‘a biographical note’, the following handwritten verse:

How delightful to meet Mrs Harwood!
(Everyone wants to know her)
with her polished floor
and her children (four)
She types out her poetry neatly
and attunes her attention sweetly
as domestic crises occur.
How delightful to meet Mrs Harwood!
Who is worshipped by all who listen
as she plays them the works of Brahms
the tears on their eyelids shake and glisten
and editors rush to her arms.
How delightful to meet Mrs Harwood!
(Everyone wants to know her)
She writes 999 verses
which her family greet with curses
as she scrawls them without demur.
How delightful to meet Mrs Harwood!
(Everyone wants to meet her).

‘Mrs Harwood’ is the domestic goddess, femininely neat and sweet, but also an artistic woman, moving her listeners to tears with her piano playing – and

¹ Despite the fact that she was awarded the annual Meanjin Prize in both 1959 and 1960.
² Meanjin Archive, University of Melbourne, Harwood file: CC to GH, 11/12/58.
³ Meanjin Archive, University of Melbourne, Harwood file: GH to CBC, 23/10/59. Rpr. In A Steady Storm of Correspondence, 81.
driving her family to distraction with her prolific writing. It is a wonderful self-parody by this ‘Hobart housewife and poet’: apparently Gwen Harwood did take pride in her cooking and preserves, as well as her music and poetry, so this ‘Mrs Harwood’ is indeed one aspect of her self. At the same time, since ‘Everyone wants to know her’ — including editors, who ‘rush to her arms’ — editor Christesen is gently ridiculed as well.

In an intriguing note at the foot of the page she adds: ‘I am married to the F.W. Harwood whose name appears in Triebel’s review p. 381 of the current Meanjin.’4 ‘Mrs Harwood’ is thus moved out of the parody and placed in her relationship to her husband, a linguist, the sort of person who is taken seriously in Meanjin. This note locates the author as an historical person, and one not to be condescended to.

But the ‘biographical note’ in verse gains further dimensions when we recognise the way it echoes T.S. Eliot’s ‘Lines to Ralph Hodgson Esqre’:

How delightful to meet Mr Hodgson!
(Everyone wants to know him)
With his musical sounds
And his Baskerville Hound...

The poem concludes with an absurd vision, reminiscent of Edward Lear:

He has 999 canaries
And round his head finches and fairies
In jubilant rapture skim.
How delightful to meet Mr Hodgson!
(Everyone wants to meet him).’ (Collected Poems, 150–51)

Hodgson was a minor Georgian poet, a decade Eliot’s senior, who had established his name with five volumes of verse published by 1917, but who wrote very little thereafter. Beyond representing the poetry that the modernists set out to supersede, what the unfortunate Hodgson had done to deserve Eliot’s mockery all those years later I do not know. The point for Harwood is, presumably, that his poetry and his public persona are equally risible — akin to the curiosity value, for literary editors, of the housewife-poet, ‘Mrs Harwood’, who cannot possibly be considered to belong in the ranks of modern poets.5

4 Meanjin Archive, University of Melbourne, Harwood file. This material is copyright, Estate of Gwen Harwood, and is quoted with the permission of John Harwood.

5 Around this time, Harwood changes her tactics, and begins to send Meanjin poems by Walter Lehmann and Francis Geyer. Christesen accepts a number of these, though it is clear he knows about Harwood’s poetic personae (see note 7, below). One exchange shows him handling Geyer with kid gloves: he sends back a group of poems asking for improvements but offering to publish two of them, revised or not (6/7/62). Geyer responds asking to have
While the poet asserted to her editor, with irony and defensive pride, her status as ‘Mrs Harwood’, wife and mother, she was well aware that there was no place in modernist literary culture for the experiences of everyday domestic life. Such subject matter, Judith Wright wrote, almost inevitably slips into ‘the realm of the bourgeois and the banal’ (qtd. in Josephi 64). Wright herself successfully universalised the experiences of sexual love and maternity (Woman to Man 1949), without addressing the particulars of family and suburban life. Thea Astley, in her early novels, joined the ranks of men (painters as well as writers) who satirised suburban life. Her sympathetic characters were social misfits and outsiders from whose perspective Australian suburban life was revealed in all its materialism and conformism. These sympathetic characters in her novels are young people, or adult men, but not women. Adult women were identified with the suburban, with consumerism and cultural pretentiousness, like the mother in The Slow Natives (Sheridan 266–68). In a similar move, Gwen Harwood’s Kröte poems of the same late 50s – early 60s period satirised the cultural pretensions of the local suburban bourgeoisie through the sympathetic character of a hapless male émigré musician who drinks to excess.

Satire might redeem the everyday domestic and suburban for art, but lyric poetry addressing suburban themes was rare. Although some younger male poets including Bruce Dawe and Chris Wallace-Crabbe were beginning to move from satire to lyric in their ‘suburban poetry’ (McCooy 105–07), domestic modernity was a minefield for female writers. In the discourses of popular culture these dimensions of post-war social life were the domain of women, and at the farthest possible remove from art. The popular press, when it did notice a woman’s creative achievement, insisted that she had moved outside of her ordained sphere – ‘Tas. Housewife in Hoax of Year’ was Harwood’s taste of this. ‘Busy housewife finds time for writing’ was the Age headline that greeted Dorothy Hewett’s 1959 novel, Bobbin’ Up (qtd. in Hewett 8).

The concept of the suburban, which Harwood deliberately invokes in taking on and playing with the ‘Tas. Housewife’ epithet, was the object of intense ideological critique and celebration in the 1950s and 1960s. Domestic life in this period took the historically specific forms of post-war affluence and the ‘reorganisation of suburbia as a site of consumption, domestic hygiene, rationalisation and national identity formation’ (Ross qtd. in McCann viii).

the two named poems published ‘as you suggest’, but adding slyly: ‘It is kind of you to let me have your comments which are always of interest’ (19/7/62). At least, I read this as irony, although Charlene Fenton’s account of the Meanjin correspondence sees it as a ‘passive and subdued reply’.
These new functions lent additional and distinctively modern dimensions to the female role of wife, mother and housewife – more prominence in domestic management and the socialisation of children, and a more elevated role in national identity formation as a consequence. Women were supposed to be grateful for their modern suburban homes and proud of their enhanced domestic roles, but not to ask for anything more. Public roles in politics, work and culture were drastically circumscribed by these modern redefinitions of a separate female sphere. Cold war emphasis on the home as a front against creeping communism added a more overtly political aspect to the celebration of domestic modernity (Brett; May).

At the same time, cultural critics like Lewis Mumford, in *The City in History*, characterised suburbanisation as antithetical to the true ‘urbanisation’ that could make cities into places of dramatic social exchange (Josephi 64). In Australia Robin Boyd and Donald Horne joined artists and writers in attacking suburbia as the epitome of conformity and materialism. In this context, the close ideological association of women and femininity with suburbia meant that women in their gender-specific roles became the target of critique. They were seen as the principal consumers, tasteless homemakers, imposers of domestic discipline and barriers to progressive social and cultural change. Women writers and artists who sought to establish their credibility in this atmosphere had to disassociate their art from their own suburban existence, and embrace a modernity that took no account of domestic life (Sheridan 262, 270). In this discourse, what is reviled – the domestic, the everyday, the conventional – is feminised, and what is desired – whether liberation from everyday domesticity, or from an alienating social world – does not account for women’s experiences of both isolation and local agency in their suburban homes.

The rhetorical opposition of public and domestic life, and invisible but persistent slippages between the two, persist. Today, when the everyday, the quotidian, is a favoured motif in all the arts, and an important analytical concept in cultural theory, its relationship to its shadow domain still requires feminist deconstruction. Even in contemporary thinking about ‘everyday modernity’, which attempts to overcome the ideological opposition between critique and celebration, blindness to gender issues ensures that a gendered division of labour in the home, and the volatility of its valuation, is maintained.

A significant instance of such blindness emerges in recent work addressing the complex constitution of ‘suburbia’ as ‘both a tangible site, a discursive fiction ... an extremely unstable collection of tropes, representational conventions and stereotypes’. In this introduction to the special issue of
Australian Literary Studies, ‘Writing the Everyday: Australian Literature and the Limits of Suburbia’ Andrew McCann notes the persistence of ‘suburbia’ as ‘a neuralgic point in debates about Australian culture and Australian identity since the end of the nineteenth century’ (McCann viii). While the elitist anti-suburbanism of postwar figures like Patrick White and Robin Boyd is now anachronistic, it is claimed, ‘suburbia’ is still constructed in contemporary discourse as a space of the everyday, to be escaped or transcended. Both the volatility and the persistence of suburbia as a discursive fiction might best be explained, I would suggest, by considering gender – both its role in the constitution of that discourse, and the variant readings of the domestic to be found in (mainly) women’s writing.

Gwen Harwood’s suburban poems of the early 1960s are a case in point. Despite her clear apprehension that, in the world’s eyes, ‘housewife’ and ‘poet’ were incompatible terms, she wrote a small but significant group of poems on domestic themes where satire is only one element of her complex treatment of the plight of creative women imprisoned in social definitions of the housewife and mother. These poems are structured around violent contrasts between the woman’s past aspirations and hopes for love and creativity, and the distractions and demands of her present life as the housebound mother of small children. Harwood indicates that she is well aware of buying into current discourse on suburbia by actually titling two of these poems ‘suburban sonnets’.

To be a woman artist dealing in such matters from a female point of view, however ironically, was suspect. Might she be indulging in special pleading for her sex? Or in that most un-Australian of activities, ‘whingeing’? The women of this post-war generation were sensitive to such accusations, and their responses to the resurgent women’s movement of the early 1970s reflect this. Harwood, for example, asserted that ‘discrimination is too strong a word’ to describe the scant acknowledgement that ‘Gwen Harwood’ received from editors compared to their enthusiastic responses to ‘Walter Lehmann’ or ‘Francis Geyer’ (Hoddinott 90). And she fiercely rejected a feminist interpretation of these ‘suburban’ poems as protesting against women’s victimisation in patriarchal culture, especially when they were also read as autobiographical confessions (Hoddinott 75; Strauss 127–28). In one interview she declared: ‘Domesticity, I never grizzled about it .... I used to prop up books of poetry over the sink; they’d get puffy with soap splashes, but I read and read...’ (Williams 58). Yet before Women’s Liberation came on the scene, and in the private context of a letter to her friend Ann Jennings, she wrote in 1961, ‘I dream of a world in which there is no insoluble choice for women’, as
construed by the women’s magazines of the day, between ‘Holy Motherhood v Secular Career’ (A Steady Storm of Correspondence 116).

I include just four poems in this discussion. The first and best-known is ‘Suburban Sonnet’ and it begins:

She practises a fugue, though it can matter
 to no one now if she plays it well or not.
 Beside her on the floor two children chatter,
 then scream and fight. She hushes them. A pot
 boils over... (Collected Poems 159)

As she mops up the spills and comforts the children, who ‘seem afraid’ when they find the dead body of a mouse in a trap, she feels nausea and her veins ache – she is pregnant again. She remembers that ‘once she played / for Rubenstein, who yawned’. The daily bread of domestic life is parodied in the words on the paper that she uses to wrap the dead mouse, ‘Tasty dishes from stale bread’.

The housewife mocked by such false comforts from women’s magazines recurs in ‘Suburban Sonnet: Boxing Day’ (Collected Poems 157). Here, ‘framed in the doorway: woman with broom’, she sees the magazine headline, ‘How to keep your husband’s love’. But ‘the simple fact is, she’s too tired to move’. In the sestet, as a child crowns her queen of the home with a wreath of tinsel, she asks herself:

O where’s the demon lover, the wild boy
 who kissed the future to her flesh beneath
 what skies, what stars, what space!

A third sonnet, ‘In the Park’ (Collected Poems 65) brings the woman into an unexpected meeting with a former lover as she sits with her three children playing and bickering around her. As they exchange pleasantries, she perceives his uneasy distance from her. She assures him in conventional terms of the sweetness of motherhood. But left alone, she ‘sits staring at her feet. / To the wind she says, “They have eaten me alive”. This much-discussed line is consistent with the images of the ‘dismembered toy’ in the first and the dead mouse in the second of the ‘Suburban Sonnets’. Yet Harwood has suggested that it can be read ‘in the scriptural sense ... where the Bread of Life is given and eaten quite literally, as a woman gives her body to her children’ (Strauss 132–33).

Nevertheless it is a violent image, and its violence is the dominant tone of the last of these four poems, ‘Burning Sappho’ (Collected Poems 158). Its first stanza goes like this:
The clothes are washed, the house is clean
I find my pen and start to write.
Something like anger forks between
my child and me. She kicks her good
New well-selected toys with spite
around the room, and whines for food.
Inside my smile a monster grins
and sticks her image through with pins.

Here is a first-person voice, unlike the sonnets. Three times during the day
the woman – rather like the well-organised housewife in ‘How pleasant to
meet Mrs Harwood!’ – settles down to write. Three times she is interrupted by
others’ demands. The principal poetic device is the contrast between her outer
smiling compliance and her inner ‘monster’, ‘fiend’, devil’. This violent
contrast is offset by the regular stanza form, which derives – ironically enough
– from Byron’s Don Juan. From Byron, too, comes the title phrase, ‘Burning
Sappho’, naming the passion of the first great woman poet – in this context,
the passion of anger. Finally, in the early morning hour (reminiscent of Sylvia
Plath’s ‘still blue hour before the baby’s cry’), the poet’s moment comes, and:

...stirs afresh
my shaping element. The mind
with images of love and pain
grapples down guls of sleep. I’ll find
my truth, my poem, and grasp it yet.

All four poems locate the woman and her family squarely in 1950s suburban
life, defined by its everyday chores and occasional rituals. The voices of
popular discourses on housekeeping, child-rearing and husband-maintenance
are ever-present. With these voices as background, the poems’ highly
concentrated images and tight metric forms perform the ‘subject and counter-
subject’ of a fugue. Like her Sappho, Harwood has boldly grasped the forms of
high culture to articulate ‘[her] truth, [her] poem’ of the domestic everyday,
and its inevitable implication in the young woman’s creativity.

Harwood was taking a big risk – she produced these ‘suburban’ poems in
the burst of creativity which culminated in her successful bid for recognition
as a serious poet with the publication of her first book, Poems 1963. During
these years, from 1958 onwards (when all of her four children were finally in
school), her artistic isolation in Hobart ended as she met and formed
friendships with Vivian Smith, Alec Hope, James McAuley and Vincent
Buckley, as well as the composer Rex Hobcroft, with whom she would
collaborate as a librettist.
It was perhaps to protect ‘Gwen Harwood’ from contamination by such domestic subject matter and angry sentiments that she published all but one of these poems over the nom de plume of Miriam Stone. Stone first appeared in 1962–3, publishing five poems in the Bulletin (Strauss 21). But she withdrew ‘Burning Sappho’ from Geoffrey Dutton’s edition of Poetry Australia 1962 because, she said, it was ‘too cruel’ (Strauss 129). Harwood ‘outed’ herself as Miriam Stone in her 1968 volume of poems, where she published it in a modified form.\(^6\) Whether it was Stone or Harwood claiming the name Sappho, it was surely taking an additional risk to associate herself with a poet almost as famous for her reputed lesbianism as for her lyric gift.

Of the four poems I’ve chosen to discuss here, the sonnet ‘In the Park’ was published not by ‘Miriam Stone’, but by ‘Walter Lehmann’. It appeared in the Bulletin in 1961. A poem with a male signature but a female point of view, ending with the line, ‘They have eaten me alive’ apparently attracted no negative comment. Indeed, Harwood told an interviewer, with evident pleasure, that somebody once said to her that no woman could have written it: ‘Only a man could have written that poem with the necessary self-detachment’ (qtd. in Trigg 39). Not surprisingly, when it became known as a ‘Gwen Harwood’ poem it acquired a power to shock that perhaps accounts for it becoming the second most anthologised of her works (Strauss 130; Trigg 39).

Gwen Harwood claimed ‘In the Park’ and other ‘Walter Lehmann’ poems as her own in her Poems 1963, as Lehmann had already been unmasked as the author of the scandalous Bulletin acrostic sonnets. It was not until her second book, Poems Volume 2 1968, that Harwood claimed Miriam Stone, and Francis Geyer (the inventor of Professor Kröte) as her disguises.\(^7\)

Miriam Stone was the only female among the several poetic disguises that Harwood invented during these years, and she described her to the friend who dealt with the Stone correspondence as ‘a lovely lady poet, married (of course, how else would she have any grasp of the world’s sorrows?) with child. Nobody will be expecting me to be a lady poet’ (Hoddinott 98). This says a lot. You can hear the disdain in ‘lovely lady poet’, you can hear the self-conscious caricature of women’s woes, and you can sense bravado in Harwood’s delighted certainty that ‘nobody will be expecting me to be a lady

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6 Cassandra Atherton discusses Miriam Stone and her poems in the context of her book’s argument that the Harwood pseudonyms are more than names, actually ‘sub-personalities’. She includes an intriguing, detailed account of the variant published versions of ‘Burning Sappho’, and also discusses the ‘Sappho cards’ that Harwood liked to make and send to friends: Flashing Eyes and Floating Hair, 140–56.

7 Christesen at least had twigged to Geyer, but continued to publish ‘him’. In the Meanjin archive there is a letter from Francis Geyer (9/5/62) on which he wrote: ‘Place in Gwen Harwood file – one of her pseudonyms!!!’ (Harwood File).
poet’ after the Walter Lehmann unmasking, when an angry Donald Horne, the 
Bulletin editor, had scornfully referred to ‘the fantasies of lady poets’ (8). Yet 
with ‘Miriam Stone’ she inaugurated, in Australian poetry at least, that ‘genre 
of women’s writing … whereby women give voice to the constraints of 
domesticity’. Pointing this out, Stephanie Trigg usefully draws parallels with 
the domestic poems of her younger American contemporaries, Sylvia Plath 

It is worth remembering how rare it was to find, in the 1950s and 1960s, 
poetry that dealt with any aspects of women’s domestic experiences. They 
were offered – and read – with a certain distanced wariness. Yet such poems 
were read very differently a decade later, with the advent of the Women’s 
Liberation Movement. Harwood’s domestic lyrics would often be read as 
autobiographical or confessional. As I have mentioned, she found herself 
contending against this reading to such an extent that she later wrote a parody 
of ‘In the Park’ that begins:

She sits in the park, wishing she had never written 
about that dowdy housewife and her brood. 
Better, The Memoirs of a Mad Sex-Kitten, 
or a high-minded Ode to Motherhood (qtd. in Trigg 104).

She wishes, that is, that she had not written a poem of complaint. Yet 
Harwood’s choice of the name Miriam Stone recalls the priestess Miriam of 
the Old Testament, sister of Moses, whom God punished for insubordination, 
and who had good cause for complaint (Strauss 128). It also suggests her 
Jewishness, a cultural identity she would have shared – as well as her 
‘housewife’ designation – with Plath, Rich and other American women poets 
coming into prominence in the early 1960s. She is tapping in, here, to a 
feminist tradition of female complaint, the furious complaint of a dispossessed 
priestess, a ‘burning Sappho’ – a woman poet.

This is an altogether different tradition of female complaint from the abject 
victimhood of the anonymous ballad, ‘The Housewife’s Lament’, whose 
chorus goes:

O life is a toil and love is a trouble 
Beauty will fade and riches will flee 
Wages will dwindle and prices will double 
And nothing is as I would wish it to be.

Nineteen seventies feminism had a tendency to valorise female complaint no 
matter what its historical context, as demonstration of the longevity of 
women’s oppression. The language of beauty and riches, wages and prices in
'The Housewife’s Lament', for instance, strongly suggesting late nineteenth and early twentieth-century capitalism, was sung with gusto at women’s gatherings in the 1970s. Yet cultural disdain for modern suburban life coloured feminist attitudes to the figure of the contemporary housewife, the ‘role’ they were rejecting. Robyn Archer’s song, ‘Neurotica Suburbia’ (written in 1974), captures women’s liberation’s awkward mixture of pity and scorn for the housewife-victim. Her story of isolation and loneliness, pills, booze and TV is punctuated by this chorus (sung by ‘Dr. Devious and Nurse No-good’):

Neurotica Suburbia you’re quite a girl
Your life’s so full it’s such a whiz and a whirl
With your babies and your unit and your old TV
Well hell how happy can one woman be! (The Ladies’ Choice)

Ambivalence towards the figure of the housewife was endemic (Johnson and Lloyd). She was often set up as the victim to be rescued by feminism, yet she was also seen as salt of the earth, the woman persisting in her traditional role despite its devaluation by modern patriarchal culture – the position on motherhood taken by Adrienne Rich in her influential book, Of Woman Born (1978). Robyn Archer’s setting of Harwood’s ‘Suburban Sonnet’ (Wild Girl in the Heart) moves a long way from the satire of ‘Neurotica Suburbia’. It shows a composer, who has learned the lessons of Brecht and Weill, musically performing the irony of constant domestic interruptions to the fugue that the woman is trying to play.  

Nevertheless, Miriam Stone was of limited value to Harwood – only seven poems by her made it into book form, and two more were later printed in the 2003 Collected Poems. Gwen Harwood devised many other ways of giving voice to her experience of being a woman in a male-dominated world. Unlike her American counterparts, she did not see herself as part of a poetic revolution, breaking literary and social conventions in order to make the world anew. Rather, she preferred to require traditional forms to bend and adapt, to bear the load of domesticity’s ‘unpoetic’ material.

It may be hard to credit how disfavoured such subjects were in the 50s and 60s, when high modernism disdained the popular and the domestic. Harwood’s ‘suburban sonnets’ crossed that border, albeit (like much of her other poetry) using a dramatic persona that could freely mix satirical or ironic perspectives with lyricism. These distancing tactics suggest that she was also deeply implicated in the period’s predominantly negative attitude to the feminised

8 Compare Hoddinott; ‘the fugue ... is under constant attack from the staccato statements of the domestic accidents which repeatedly interrupt....’ (99).
'domestic' and 'suburban'. Her 'suburban' poems of the early 60s were a bold experiment in their time. I suggest that today they speak to us again of the persistent tensions inherent in the concepts of suburbia and domestic modernity.

WORKS CITED


