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Journal of Women's History, Volume 21, Number 2, Summer 2009, pp. 115-137 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/jowh.0.0071

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Domestic Humor and Redefining the 1950s Housewife Writer in Fan Mail to Shirley Jackson

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Letters to author Shirley Jackson from fans of her domestic-humor literature offer important new evidence about the complexities and contradictions of gender norms in the post–World War II era. They bolster scholarship that acknowledges the power of postwar domestic and gender ideology, but also locates the sites where women, however tentatively, questioned the limitations of Betty Friedan’s feminine mystique. This article demonstrates that women read such domestic-humor literature as Jackson’s in contradictory ways. On the one hand, these letters support, at least in part, Friedan’s assertion that the so-called housewife writer and domestic-humor literature reinforced domestic gender norms. On the other hand, these letters also demonstrate that the figure of the housewife writer represented a very specific strategic response to the rigid gender norms of the feminine mystique. The housewife writer blurred and subverted the line between the work of the “housewife” and that of the writer.

Feminist scholars agree that it is high time we started paying more attention to the work of Shirley Jackson (1916–1965).1 An accomplished author of disturbing short stories and novels that vividly depict modern alienation, malice, and fear (including her best-known story, “The Lottery”), Shirley Jackson was also a so-called housewife writer. She wrote two bestselling volumes of domestic humor—Life Among the Savages (1953) and Raising Demons (1957)—as well as articles about family life published in such magazines as Good Housekeeping, Woman’s Day, and Woman’s Home Companion. Jackson offered readers dryly humorous and vividly evocative descriptions of the Sisyphean nature of housework and her husband’s pointed disinterest in domestic life. She portrayed her children as engaging but almost alien creatures, intensely involved in rather disturbing imaginary worlds and inexplicable activities. But while Jackson’s domestic humor won thousands of fans, it drew the fire of Betty Friedan in The Feminine Mystique (1963).

In her influential book, Friedan exposed what she viewed as the widespread oppression and depression of women struggling to live up to a postwar feminine ideal that limited their lives to the domestic sphere.
She criticized such domestic humorists as Jackson, Jean Kerr, and Betty McDonald for their self-deprecating descriptions of mild domestic chaos, always tempered by truly loving interactions between the author and her children; Friedan asserted that such writing implicitly encouraged women to simply laugh off any feelings of discontent or isolation.

There is something about Housewife Writers that isn’t funny—like Uncle Tom, or Amos and Andy. “Laugh,” the Housewife Writers tell the real housewife, “if you are feeling desperate, empty, bored, trapped in the bedmaking, chauffeuring and dishwashing details. Isn’t it funny? We’re all in the same trap.” Do real housewives then dissipate in laughter their dreams and their sense of desperation? Do they think their frustrated abilities and their limited lives are a joke? Shirley Jackson makes the beds, loves and laughs at her son—and writes another book. Jean Kerr’s plays are produced on Broadway. The joke is not on them.2

Friedan condemned these authors as hypocrites who ignored their own professional success, pretending that they were wholly absorbed in the domestic.

More recent and more nuanced readings of domestic humor, however, demonstrate other possibilities. Postwar domestic humor, in historian Nancy Walker’s words, “expressed a hostility toward rigid role definition that prefigure[d] the issues of the women’s movement” and laid the groundwork for more overt resistance to sexism by beginning to create a sense of shared oppression among women.3 Zita Dresner has asserted that postwar domestic humor not only fostered a new sense of solidarity among housewives isolated by life in suburbia, but also helped women “recognize and laugh at the incongruities between the ideal ‘norm’ and the realities of the average woman’s life,” which is “the first step a reader will take toward permitting herself and others like her, some flexibility in deviating from the impossible cultural standards.”4 As literary scholar Jennifer Diamond states: “self-disparagement is a sophisticated rhetorical move that indicates housewife humor as a crafted fiction, capable of producing and sustaining cultural critique.”5 According to such re-readings, domestic-humor literature invited readers to laugh not at the authors’ incompetence but rather at the ridiculous demands of postwar domesticity. They articulated what historian Eva Moskowitz calls “a discourse of discontent” about gender norms.6

Such analysis of cultural texts and literary works, however, does not address how actual “housewives” responded to domestic-humor literature. What evidence do we have that the readers themselves recognized a subtext in domestic humor that called gender norms into question? I seek
to at least partially answer this question by examining the fan mail sent to Shirley Jackson. These letters reveal that some women did indeed seem to laugh at their own discontent and frustration with homemaking and raising children after reading (and enjoying) Jackson’s humorous accounts of home life. In part, then, these letters support Friedan’s assertions about the acquiescence of housewife writers and their readers to the domestic ideals of the time.

These letters also demonstrate, however, that fans of Jackson’s writing clearly believed that the figure of the housewife writer offered them an opportunity for extending and even challenging those domestic ideals by becoming writers themselves, and perhaps joining a community of women beginning to question those limitations. Although the majority of women who wrote to Jackson hesitantly expressed their own desire to be an author, and described it with considerable self-deprecation, they nonetheless quite plainly stated that they wanted to find their (literary) voices—to become speaking subjects. As women had done for at least a century before, they perceived the possibilities of exercising power in the public realm via the published word. These women clearly equated authorship—specifically, being paid to publish their writing—with a freedom and fulfillment they did not experience in the household. Moreover, in keeping with a persistent trend in U.S. women’s history, they sought to transform their private, domestic experiences (housekeeping and childrearing) into very public careers. Like Progressive Era reformers, for example, these women believed that their culturally sanctioned roles as mothers and homemakers could actually give them a new kind of public authority—in this case as authors, specifically housewife writers.

Despite her notably successful career in the post–World War II period, for many years scholars rarely cited Jackson as part of the broader canon of mid-twentieth-century fiction writers. Literary critics and historians today argue that Jackson’s domestic-humor publications subsequently marginalized her more serious writing. At the very least, critics always expressed surprise that Jackson could produce short stories and novels of modern-day alienation, cruelty, and dread as well as seemingly much more light-hearted chronicles of family life. These two oeuvres were not as distinct or as different as they may seem, however: themes of domesticity and home, though often disquietingly convoluted, appear throughout all of Jackson’s writing. Moreover, as the titles of her collected domestic humor suggest, Jackson’s descriptions painted a funny picture of a busy, happy family life, but they also contain a distinct flavor of the gothic consistently hinting at the darker side of housekeeping and childrearing.

Fans who wrote to Jackson rarely commented on the supposed contrast between her domestic humor and her other writings; perhaps they knew
better than the average literary critic the areas of overlap between horror and homemaking. Far more prevalent in these letters is a sense of recognition. Few letter writers described their racial or ethnic background, or their class location, but because so many of them so obviously believed that Jackson’s descriptions of middle-class life in a (white, Christian) Vermont village echoed their own experiences, I think it is safe to assume that the majority of these fans were heterosexual, white, and middle class. The vast majority were women, married with young children, and probably in their mid- to late twenties, and they clearly believed Jackson’s domestic life was like their own.

Without examining the fan mail to every other domestic humorist of the time, it is impossible to say whether Jackson received more than an average number of fan letters, particularly from would-be authors. Virtually all well-known published authors must receive at least some mail from aspiring writers. Jackson’s work, with its dark undercurrent of both gothic mystery and modern alienation, may have been particularly provocative in inspiring her readers to imagine the possibility of somehow challenging the limits of domesticity, but she also received many fan letters that simply described their appreciation of good writing. Also, Jackson received a great deal of fan mail that did not address her domestic humor. “The Lottery” alone elicited hundreds of letters both to its author and to The New Yorker, which first published it.

But letters to Jackson regarding her domestic humor constitute an important source for scholars interested in the ways women possibly debated and contested post–WWII gender norms. They speak directly to the questions raised by feminist analysis of domestic humor. When readers laughed along with Jackson, did they do so at the expense of laughing off any dissatisfaction or sense of oppression they may have felt? Or did the readers perceive a subtext of cultural criticism? Communications scholar Lisa Merrill writes that in feminist humor, “it is the situation which is ridiculed, rather than the characters struggling to negotiate their circumstances. Questioning one’s circumstances is a rebellious posture.” Did readers question their circumstances after reading Jackson’s work?

Not directly. For example, a 1953 letter from Illinois described its writer’s pleasure in reading Life Among the Savages, which produced “such a mellow mood I forgot to be angry any longer at my husband, who had put me in a pout earlier in the evening by suggesting that a check I’d just received for an article, and all such earnings in the future, be put in the savings account.” This woman, fighting for economic independence and an authorial identity, read Jackson’s humorous accounts of family life and decided instead to laugh off the conflict with her husband: she “forgot to be
angry.” She made a joke of her “frustrated abilities”—exactly the response to housewife writers so darkly predicted by Friedan.

However, for the remainder of the letter the writer described her ongoing desire to write and be published. In an abrupt switch—typical of many of these letters—she moves from seeming to comply with the status quo of gendered domesticity to clearly searching for a way to challenge those boundaries by means of a writing career:

Enjoy the book as I did, I was still disappointed. I was hungry to see how in [H]ades you fit in two hours a day for writing. Theoretically, I try to call the hours from 9:30 a.m.—when I’ve recovered from No. 1 boy’s departure for school—and 11:30 a.m.—when No. 2 boy (a diesel engine) comes in and demands refueling. . . . But that’s pure theory. There are a million interruptions. My nearest and dearest friends save their telephone calls til after lunch, but there are so many who are neither near nor dear, including door-to-door salesmen (a pox on the lot of them!) I must answer their ring, for it just might conceivably be the special delivery man with a check from some magazine. . . .

After the NO. 1 boy was born I simply couldn’t find time to write, and that condition persisted after NO. 2 boy came along. Now that I have three, of course I have infinitely more spare time, and a corresponding need for more money to swell the income. But to make money, you have to Write Something, and concentrate for a few hours each day—and by the time quiet descends at night I’m too exhausted physically to keep my mind in gear. . . .

If you’ve written anything on how you manage your daily stint I’d like to know about it . . . if you’ve had anything on the subject so dear to my heart and pocketbook, I’ve missed it.

But I do want you to know that it’s all been a big, jolly inspiration to me even if I don’t know how you manage it. Before batting this out, I knocked out a few paragraphs on what it feels like to be the mother of a diesel engine. Now maybe—if I polish that up while I do the dishes, and add a few more paragraphs while I’m making two gallons of potato salad for tomorrow’s party—just maybe I’ll have something.20

Again and again, fan letters followed the pattern of the letter above. These women wanted to write; they believed their experiences as mothers and homemakers provided ample material with which to create a new, more public authority through a writing career, but domestic and parental duties severely limited their time.

The limitations imposed by the feminine mystique are clear in this letter: the demands of domesticity obviously constrained this woman’s
desire to pursue her own interests. In this sense, the fan did not question her circumstances and did not assume a “rebellious posture.” But it also clearly demonstrates that this woman believed that her experiences in the home could actually be a “big, jolly inspiration”; they could provide the material with which to pursue a professional writing career—an important avenue toward a more complete subjectivity, with both financial and personal rewards. And she doggedly pursued that professional career. She submitted articles to magazines, “knocked out a few paragraphs” about mothering, and waited hopefully for “the special delivery man with a check.” But meanwhile, the dishes had to be done, the kids had to be fed, and the potato salad had to be made. How could she, and all the would-be authors who wrote to Jackson, finish that work and at the same time “concentrate for a few hours each day”?

They turned to Jackson, someone who obviously had managed to do both, for advice; these women wanted to know how Jackson succeeded as a writer while at the same time maintaining a home and raising children. Like the letter writer above, they were “hungry to see how in Hades” Jackson carved out time for writing. They wondered specifically about practical strategies for transforming their domestic experiences into publishable work. How did Shirley do it? A 1954 letter asked, “When do you write?”21 A short undated letter questioned, “When do you find time to write?”22 A 1953 letter from New York described the fan’s experience with a mysterious, ghostly presence in her home (a reference to Jackson’s gothic tales of house hauntings), adding a postscript: “Also when do you write? Another mystery left unexplained!”23 In part, these women seemed simply to envy what they assumed to be Jackson’s ability to take time away from domestic responsibilities in order to pursue meaningful activities.24 But their keen interest in how Jackson worked indicates a broader concern with navigating the limitations of the feminine mystique.

Jackson’s fans seemed resigned to the inevitability of women’s domestic duties, and in that sense her domestic humor did not push them to question their circumstances. But it also suggested to them a strategy for pursuing a career that blurred home and public by writing about the domestic. They used Jackson’s housewife humor as a starting point for articulating the importance of pursuing a greater sense of self, of subjectivity. For them, Jackson’s work seemed to create a space to share with other women (or, at least, one woman—Jackson herself) both their frustrations with the limits of domesticity and their desire to navigate those limits with the vehicle of the written word.25 This was one strategic response to the feminine mystique: transforming domestic experiences into a new kind of public authority—a paid career.
For example, a 1960 letter stated: “Your warm and sensitive writing not only gives me a lift; it also makes me know that this is the kind of thing I like to write. One of these days, when the children are a little older and I have more time, I will sit down and continue the course in short-story writing that I’ve started.” Although this fan took it for granted that childrearing must take precedence over her dreams of a career, Jackson’s work offered her another option: combining the domestic with the literary. Quite contrary to Friedan’s assertion that housewife humor reinforced the domesticity trap facing many ordinary women, Jackson’s writing inspired them to consider a strategy for combining homemaking and professional writing. They responded to the feminine mystique not with an overt challenge but an attempt to find ways to incorporate the domestic into a public career, thus using their proscribed social role to actually challenge and expand that role.

A 1960 letter from a Los Angeles fan illustrates how women wrote to Jackson hoping to transform the limitations of domesticity into an authorial identity:

When I feel a complete failure as a housekeeper and child-rearer I pick up “Raising Demons” or “Life Among the Savages” and I am delighted to find there is at least one, lonely, solitary woman who feels as I do. Please don’t disillusion me by telling me you are really a meticulous and well-organized person. . . .

I would like to ask you a question. Is it ridiculous for me to say that I want to write; have wanted to write as long as I can remember; feel a need to write that is so strong that it is figuratively “killing me” and yet, at age 31, have only completed two pieces? I have tried other creative forms in order to fill this need but they just don’t do it. . . .

If I wanted to be a lawyer, doctor, or dentist I could so easily find one with whom I could discuss the problem of his field. But where does one find a writer? I realize it’s an imposition, but I would so appreciate any advice or encouragement you could give me.27

This letter suggests that when women read domestic humor, and when they wrote to Jackson, they felt they had joined a community of women (or, at least, found one other woman) who failed to fulfill the feminine mystique—and made a career based on writing about that failure.

Literary scholar Jeanne Perreault has noted the role of autobiography in women’s lives: “When ‘received models’ of self are narrow and too uniform, self-invention may be an imperative.” Language, and the written word specifically, are essential tools for self-invention, as argued
by feminist theorists, thinkers, and authors from Audre Lorde to Hélène Cixous. Though philosophers and scholars are right to fiercely debate the precise meaning of “authorship,” there is no doubt that it confers authority of some kind—perhaps, first and foremost, authority over self. Authorship is an act of self-determination. The women writing to Jackson sensed this and, perhaps even more significantly, they read her domestic humor as an example of work by a woman who had used writing to pursue a life outside the confines of stringent postwar gender norms by blurring the line between domestic and public.

Their impassioned discussions of the writing careers they wished to pursue indicate that, consciously or not, these women grasped the transformative power in the act of writing—and of being published. For them, being paid for their work (in direct contrast to the work of homemaking) was an essential component linking writing and self-invention. The postwar emphasis on middle-class household consumption and the proliferation of consumer goods undoubtedly also fueled their desire to transform their domestic experience into an authorial identity. A New York woman wrote to Jackson in 1956, poking fun at herself but nonetheless relating her serious aspirations to be paid for her work: “I’ve made one big sale (‘We Had Our Baby at Home’) to McCall’s—but how often do I have a baby at home? This one sale I am beginning to regard as a fluke—like the man who wins once at the races, I am eating my heart out trying to repeat. I am hoping you may have some advice.” Although joking (“how often do I have a baby at home?”), this letter writer also plainly expressed her sincere desire for a writing career.

A Missouri woman, in similar self-deprecating terms, described herself to Jackson as twenty-years-old, the mother of two small children, and “a would-be writer who has never sold a thing but a ridiculous article to a Baby Magazine.” She went on to explain that Jackson’s short story offered inspiration: “I haven’t written anything for a year but now I feel a new spark. . . I don’t want much, just a Pulitzer Prize. . . Thanks for ‘Louisa’ and the current new urge to create. Maybe some day when you are world famous and I’m just beginning to mount the crest someone will interview me and I’ll say ‘If the truth be known Shirley Jackson was the greatest single influence in my writing career’.” Again, humor—“just a Pulitzer Prize”—cloaked this woman’s obvious aspiration to a writing career and her belief that Jackson’s work influenced her own.

These women dreamed of being acknowledged and paid for their work, and they looked to Jackson for advice on attaining success. In a typical letter, a New York woman wrote in 1960: “I would like to impose on your time and good nature, and perhaps take the liberty of bothering you, but
I have a crazy ambition to write. I can’t get a decent job as a proofreader because I haven’t worked (joke) in 14 years. Tell me please, who is a good agent or can I just mail my stuff to a magazine editor?”

Mocking her own “crazy ambition” to be a writer, this woman still asked in all seriousness about the practical process of becoming a published author. She satirically pointed out that she had been working, for many years, in the domestic sphere, and asked Jackson about how to transform that unpaid labor into a paid career.

These fans felt that Jackson could understand the constraints that homemaking placed on writing aspirations, as did a woman writing from Petaluma, California in 1952: “It is now ten o’clock p.m. and I have only recently xxxx [sic] tucked the third child into bed and am sleepy and consequently my typewriter won’t spell right—please excuse the spelling and just try to get the sense.” She went on to describe her writing group, her writing teacher Mr. Brown, and her own craving to succeed as a paid writer: “I have only sold a few very minor things, but the class, and especially Mr. Brown think I will make it someday. And I hope so. But right now my youngsters are quite small and I have so very, very little time that I spend most of my time thinking up characters and finding no time to get them on paper.”

Similarly, a 1956 letter from Michigan detailed both the ways domestic duties intruded upon this woman’s authorial efforts and her determination to keep writing:

[D]espite the fact that the twins are due for naps, dishes undone and housework in piles, it seems much more important to write and tell you how very much I have enjoyed your writing for years . . . And with young children, I too have learned to write whenever there is an extra minute. . . . The twins have descended upon the typewriter so I must close. . . . I am working on a “juvenile” about a family who set out for California in 1850 . . . have 200 pages done and find it engrossing.

These letter writers felt confident that Jackson could understand and appreciate how the press of domestic duties—the dishes, the housework, and the children—intruded on one’s desire to write. In this case, “the twins” quite literally put a stop to the letter writer’s writing, “descending upon the typewriter.” Yet she managed to complete “200 pages.” And she assumed that Jackson, too, had “learned to write whenever there is an extra minute,” despite the fact that Jackson describes no such thing in any of her published works.
Another letter writer similarly assumed that Jackson could relate to the fan’s experiences as both a housewife and a writer: “I can understand every hilarious moment, we have five of our own, and six on weekends. I’m writing a book with that title, *Six on Weekends*, I hope it’s half as good as yours . . . you’ll have to excuse the notebook paper and pencil. You can understand—I’m sure—the kids are forever running off with my pen and paper.” Again, the letter described children literally limiting this woman’s writing; interestingly, none of the letter writers mentioned in any detail the possible obstacles posed by unsupportive husbands. But this fan expressed confidence that Jackson would understand the limitations children imposed. Her status as a housewife writer offered so-called real housewives a complex role model: a woman who acknowledged and apparently conformed to domestic gender norms, but who also clearly demonstrated the imperative to write, to create, and—perhaps most importantly—to be published. Contrary to Friedan’s assumptions, Jackson’s domestic humor did not mock the “frustrated abilities and limited lives” of her readers. According to the readers themselves, Jackson’s writing, from the position of a housewife writer, in fact inspired many of them to develop their abilities or, at the very least, seek advice from her about a career in writing.

For instance, a 1956 letter from New York directly elicited Jackson’s advice:

> I have never read a story about how you work . . . and it is this in which I am avidly interested. . . . Your output is to me, prodigious, yet you too have four children, a big house, find time to be a cub scout mother etc. Will you do me a favor, and believe me I know it is—and scratch in some answers to questions I’ll put on the other side of this page, stick in the self-addressed envelope, and send it to me. . . .
>
> I’m terribly serious. I don’t believe for a minute that I’m the writer you are, but if I could get as many words on paper in a year as you have published, I would be overjoyed. Perhaps I am trying to get everything else done before I feel I am free from duties and can write. I used to write after 9 or 10, when the children were in bed, but I ended up in a TB sanatorium for a year after some time of these 2 a.m. bedtimes, and when I recovered and started out again on the housework, entertaining, playing and writing, I developed malignant high-blood pressure. Shirley, how do you do it?

This woman’s questions—“Do you write every day? Same time every day? How long? Your writing hours are inflexible?—that is, can you make yourself absolutely solitary, or are you constantly interrupted by children, husband, doorbells, telephones, laundry, cleaning, etc?”—indicated that
she sought concrete, practical strategies for becoming a housewife writer. Jackson indeed answered, because the fan wrote again a year later.

The second letter began: “You are really a very nice person! I was as amazed this morning at receiving your very long and personal letter as I was the morning I received my first acceptance and check!” The next part of her letter affirmed Friedan’s assertions about how domestic humor literature undercut and belittled women’s entirely justified anger and frustration with the limits of domesticity:

I was somewhat embarrassed the day after I sat down and reeled off to you a couple of pages of what, but I was in the mental state of the girl about whom I read in this morning’s newspaper, who was so fed up with diapers and laundry that she set fire to a large pile of same, causing some $3000 damage to their very modest home! I just channeled my impulse into a letter to you, to work off my frustration at not being able to make the day 30 or 32 hours long, so I could get in everything I wanted to do.

The letter writer stated it quite clearly: instead of expressing her well-founded outrage at the rigid demands of domesticity in the 1950s, she turned to a domestic humorist to blunt her frustrations.

The letter then referenced, however, the strategies that Jackson offered this aspiring writer—“pre-typewriting planning” and ignoring the housework in favor of writing:

Right now, with my ironing piled mountain high, I am sitting out on the patio in the sun, writing you, so you see I have immediately begun to adopt some of your advice. I shall, with renewed enthusiasm, tackle the story I have had in my typewriter for so many weeks now. . . . I shall continue to plod along with my writing and find more time for it by getting lazier. . . . I shall probably use you towards my own ends—“Shirley Jackson doesn’t worry about unmade beds or a little lint under the chairs, she spends her energy thinking and writing!”

Advice to ignore the ironing and focus on one’s writing hardly conformed to the feminine mystique described by Friedan. Instead, this fan letter offers a remarkable articulation of the breaks and fractures in domestic ideology in the 1950s: while neither the writer nor Jackson seemed to consider the possibility of rejecting outright the domestic role, both assumed that one’s identity as a writer should be fostered. Though not a concerted stance against the stringent gender roles of the postwar period, this letter nonetheless demonstrates the ways ordinary women in ordinary households enacted strategies of resistance—even a problematic strategy like “getting
lazier." Jackson encouraged this woman, inspiring her to “tackle the story I had in my typewriter for so many weeks now,” and to put aside the demands of children and household to do it.

Moreover, this and other letters suggest another way women might negotiate domesticity via the written word. Women authors may utilize domestic tropes—the private—in poetry and prose to explore a wide variety of political, cultural, and social issues—the public. As Thomas Foster notes in his work on modernism, women writers “reimagined domesticity in order to reject its positioning within the binary framework of the ideology of separate spheres.” Blurring the demarcation between the domestic and the public had particular import during the Cold War, as Deborah Nelson has pointed out in her essay on women poets in the early 1960s: “Writing from within the home about the home, these poets . . . transformed a central political metaphor, legitimizing the discussion of what went on inside the home and making that discussion a reasonable concern of public discourse.” The housewife writer achieved something very similar by making her domestic experience the basis for published work.

These letters suggest that the women writing to Jackson perceived to some degree the critical subtext that feminist literary scholars have recently located in domestic-humor literature—though not going so far as to openly question their circumstances. But they did clearly believe that the housewife writer demonstrated an intriguing possibility for reimagining domestic life: combining their work in the home and their work in the public (and political) world of published writing. The rigid domestic containment of the Cold War set the parameters for that project; it sharply limited these women’s lives in many ways, but the potential for resistance lay within the written word—specifically, domestic-humor writing. As literary scholar Jutta Ittner has posited, a woman writing about domestic themes may begin to find “that the home is not a prison but her own imaginative space.”

The term “housewife writer” suggested to women whose lives were markedly proscribed by the boundaries of home in the late 1940s and 1950s that one did not in fact require an artist’s garret or a secluded office in order to write. One could, apparently, live immersed in family, in the day-to-day work of keeping house and raising children, and at the same time produce published work. Housewife humor, in Diamond’s words, “demonstrates that a room of one’s own as an actual or metaphysical space is not necessarily a prerequisite for women’s successful writing.”

As literary scholar Victoria Boynton has argued, rethinking authorship in this way opens up important possibilities for the act of creation: “it could mean that intellectual and creative workers can produce effectively when they are immersed in the interbeing of life—when their lives are full
of others and of things to do with and for others in relationships of many sorts.” Jackson’s fans read this message in her published work and wrote letters asking her for particulars about how to accomplish this, how to “produce effectively” while “immersed in the interbeing of life”: in short, how to be a housewife writer. For instance, in an undated letter, a woman from Pennsylvania thanked Jackson for the constructive criticism she apparently offered in an earlier letter:

Your letter is a real stimulant. . . . Your advice is specific and I will follow it, in detail, while being constantly grateful for your interest and encouragement and trying to deserve them. So you may think of me as working steadily and perhaps a little more intelligently now—not burning manuscripts but pounding out more and more of them. . . .

I’d like to know how you can do your writing so magnificently, be a mother-wife-housekeeper, and manage to teach a class in school, too. Your day certainly must use up most of every twenty-four hours. . . .

I am keeping your letter close to me, both for reference and for encouragement.47

This fan sought out Jackson’s advice about how to balance domestic labor and writing because she recognized, in Jackson’s domestic humor, a woman who had found a way to reimagine the domestic, to make the home her imaginative space. In this particular case, Jackson offered both encouragement and specific criticisms of the letter writer’s work.

We do not know how often Jackson offered readers such encouragement and advice. Very few of the fan letters mention any kind of extended correspondence with her, so we may assume that only a small portion of her fans enjoyed Jackson’s direct encouragement to “stop burning manuscripts” and instead keep “pounding out more and more of them.” Indeed, Jackson expressed irritation with some of her fans’ letters and had decidedly mixed feelings about her success as a domestic humorist, asserting that she wrote chronicles of family life strictly for the money.48 Always in a precarious financial situation (despite her success as a published author), Jackson clearly welcomed the money these articles brought in but noted on several occasions that they were not her “real work.”49

She resented her reputation as a domestic humorist, once complaining: “I am tired of writing dainty little biographical things that pretend I am a trim little housewife in a mother hubbard stirring up appetizing messes over a wood stove.”50 And while Jackson’s fiction offers some remarkable insights into gender norms of the mid-twentieth century, she was no feminist: she never overtly questioned those norms regarding domestic roles.51 As she
wrote: “I don’t like housework, but I do it because no one else will.”52 Her husband’s view that Jackson “believe[d] no artist was ever ruined by housework (or helped by it either)” was probably accurate.53 And yet, despite her clear belief that the housework fell to her as the woman of the house, Jackson offered quite ingenuous advice to the woman who subsequently turned a blind eye to the “ironing piled mountain high.” Although believing wholeheartedly in the importance of cooking, entertaining, and raising children, Jackson often ignored or disregarded the domestic ideals of the time. She also developed a years-long amphetamine habit that contributed to her energetic output.54

Jackson once rather flippantly described how she managed the problem, so vividly described by fans, of balancing housework and writing: “I write in the evenings mostly, I guess, although sometimes I let the children help me write in the mornings.”55 In one of her rare interviews, before the publication of Life Among the Savages, she painted a rather different picture: “50 percent of my life is spent washing and dressing the children, cooking, washing dishes and clothes, and mending. After I get it all to bed, I turn around to my typewriter and try to—well, to create concrete things again. It’s great fun, and I love it. . . . It’s as much fun as sending the children off to school. My husband fights writing; it is work for him, at least he calls it work. I find it relaxing. For one thing, it’s the only way I can get to sit down.”56 Though speaking lightly and, in the interviewer’s words, “laughingly” relating that writing is her only chance to sit down, she also suggested that writing played a critical role in her life. In fact, Jackson was a highly disciplined writer, as her children described in the introduction to a posthumous collection of her work: “Our mother tried to write every day, and treated writing in every way as her professional livelihood . . . There was always the sound of typing.”57 In addition, Jackson’s family chronicles were not strictly accurate accounts, but carefully edited versions of her real family life, which was troubled by alcohol and drug abuse as well as her husband’s philandering.58

On only one occasion did Jackson explicitly describe how the demands of her domestic role directly conflicted with her work as an author; typically, she did so in a measured, darkly humorous way that speaks volumes in a few short lines. In Life Among the Savages, she described arriving at the hospital, well into her labor, to deliver her third child:

“Name?” the desk clerk said to me politely, her pencil poised.
“Name,” I said vaguely. I remembered, and told her.
“Age?” she asked. “Sex? Occupation?”
“Writer,” I said.
“I’ll just put housewife,” she said. . . .
“Husband’s name?” she said. “Address? Occupation?”
“Just put down housewife,” I said. 59

Here, Jackson starkly exposed the limitations of being a housewife writer. In the eyes of this nurse (and perhaps the world), a mother simply could not claim the identity of author. Jackson responded obliquely but with a venomous sting; denied her voice as an author, she called into question the definition of “housewife,” collapsing all her husband’s authority and identity into that obviously contestable term.

As Jackson knew, critics used the “housewife writer” label to dismiss women’s writing. For example, in 1960, a reporter from *Cosmopolitan* wrote to her, explaining that he was “doing a piece for our August Writers’ Issue on Housewives who write—or writers who are housewives, depending on how you look at it.” 60 We can imagine the scorn with which Jackson read, and ignored, this request. And the subsequent article, coyly titled “Typewriters in the Kitchen,” undoubtedly only reinforced the stereotype of the housewife writer as not a real writer at all but a housewife who squeezed a typewriter into the domestic sphere. 61 Domestic-humor magazine articles peaked in the 1950s and early 1960s, offering readers at least the sense of expanded opportunities for publication; conversely, the term “housewife writer” carried with it the possibility of condescending derision.

But although she did not intend to do so, Jackson showed women that it was possible to transform the work of the home into the work of the mind—a writing career—by embracing the term “housewife writer” as a means to an end. They could pursue a career while also attending to household duties, particularly childrearing; in fact, they could transform those experiences within their proscribed social roles to challenge the limitations of domesticity. As late as 1979, in a how-to manual entitled *How to Be a Successful Housewife/Writer: Bylines and Babies Do Mix*, freelance writer Elaine Fantle Shimberg did not question the assumption that women would be solely responsible for housework and taking care of children. But she also insisted that women deserved the opportunity to pursue a writing career, to carve out time for their work, and to prioritize writing over immaculate housekeeping and gourmet cookery. And the widely published domestic-humor authors who contributed short statements to the volume—Peg Bracken and Erma Bombeck, for instance—agreed, stating over and over again that housewives could also be writers. 62 Almost twenty years too late for many of the women who wrote to Jackson, here at last was a volume that attempted to answer the question, “Shirley, how do you do it?” It was packed full of advice on how to pursue a professional writing career while keeping house. The contributors to this volume—and, presumably, their would-be-writer fans—clearly had reimagined the home as a creative space.
Historian Laura Shapiro has disparagingly described how Jackson’s work inspired women to write: “As soon as Jackson had published enough magazine stories to establish the hallmarks of the new literary mode—rambunctious but witty children, laconic but witty husbands, and beset but witty housewives—women rushed to their typewriters... [T]he genre was fueled... by women at home, with a sinkful of dishes and a vague yen to write.” Shapiro correctly points out that the quality of domestic-humor writing varied greatly, but I take exception to her characterization of Jackson’s readers as women “with a sinkful of dishes and a vague yen to write.” We should not underestimate the importance of many women’s search for a voice and strategies to navigate the confines of domesticity, particularly in the postwar years when rigid gender norms shaped so many women’s daily lives. While not asserting that the majority of women who wrote to Jackson possessed any particular talent as writers (nor does my research suggest that any of them actually became successful authors), I do want to emphasize that feminist historians must not so lightly dismiss what the fan letters to Jackson reveal as these women’s deeply felt and often quite articulately expressed need to write—and their redefinition of the housewife writer to find ways to speak as authors, as authorities, utilizing the domestic experience to push the boundaries of domesticity itself. Today, the growing popularity of “momoirs,” or what I call the Second Wave of domestic humorists, suggests that women continue to find humorous writing about the life of the home a compelling way to explore the complexities of gender norms, domesticity, and family life.

The letters to Jackson demonstrate both the constraints of domestic ideology in the 1950s and the ways that the figure of the housewife writer seemed to offer women the opportunity to test those constraints. On the one hand, their letters sometimes explicitly demonstrated that they took their cue from Jackson (and perhaps other “housewife writers”) and made, in Friedan’s words, a joke of “their frustrated abilities and their limited lives.” They joked about the unrelenting demands of domesticity, seeming to laughingly accept those demands as inevitable, immutable, and unchangeable. Feminist scholars who emphasize the subtext of social criticism in domestic-humor literature should not be so quick to reject Friedan’s argument that such work as Life Among the Savages reinforced normative gender and domestic ideology; these letters suggest that for some readers, that is precisely what domestic-humor literature did.

But these fans were not, as Friedan suggested, blind to the obvious fact that Jackson made writing a priority. On the other hand, they seemed to clearly understand that writing was a powerful tool of self-invention, a means of demanding fuller subjectivity and challenging the feminine
mystique by drawing on the very experiences that constituted the domestic sphere. Shirley Jackson’s readers hungered for more descriptions of how she created and sustained her identity as an author while also fulfilling her proscribed roles as wife and mother. But they did not feel that Jackson had disguised herself as a housewife writer while she really enjoyed the benefits of a successful writing career; they knew she was a professional writer, and therefore requested her advice and sought her encouragement of their own dreams to pursue a career in writing. While these letters indicate that the feminine mystique had a significant impact on women’s daily lives, they also demonstrate that women employed the strategy of the housewife writer to negotiate and test the boundaries of domestic ideology, blurring and subverting the line between the work of the housewife and that of the writer.

Notes

I am grateful to my colleagues Dr. Lauren Eastwood, Dr. Tracie Guzzio, Dr. Stephanie Harzewiski, and the anonymous readers at the Journal of Women's History for their astute and helpful suggestions regarding this article. I would also like to thank Dana T. Payne, whose gift of the collected works of Shirley Jackson kindled my interest in this topic.


9On women utilizing their domestic roles in the political arena, see, for example, Annelise Orleck, “We are that Mythical Things Called the Public: Militant Housewives During the Great Depression,” Feminist Studies 19, no. 1 (1993): 147–73. On how the shared identity of “housewives” played a critical role in the emergence of the Second Wave feminist movement, see Lesley Johnson and Justin Lloyd, Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2004).

10On the Progressive Era, see, for example, Noralee Frankel and Nancy Schrom Dye, eds., Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1995), 3.


12See, for example, Nathaniel Benchley, “Never a Dull Moment by This Family’s Not So Peaceful Hearth,” New York Herald, 28 June 1953, 1, 13. Benchley wrote: “one would sooner expect Mr. [Charles] Addams to illustrate Little Women than Miss Jackson to write a cheerful book about family life” (1).


14Some letters indicated quite the contrary. A woman who wrote in 1959, for instance, praised both The Haunting of Hill House and Raising Demons equally and with no apparent notice of two distinct genres. See Fan letter to Shirley Jackson, n.d. [1959], Shirley Jackson Collection, “K” Miscellany, 1953–1965, box 9, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC, hereafter SJC. For legal and ethical reasons, this article maintains the anonymity of the fan mail writers and does not include names or initials of the fans; when available, I have identified fan letters by city of origin.

15I found very few letters that specifically mentioned the writers’ class status. In a letter dated 25 October 1949, a woman from Baltimore, Maryland wrote to Jackson about her cramped apartment. See Fan letter to Jackson, 25 October 1949, “O–R” Miscellany, 1949–1959, box 44, SJC. Many did not even note the city or state...
in which they lived. Only one letter mentioned the writer’s race (“Negro”): see Fan letter (Los Angeles) to Jackson, 1963, “L” Miscellany, 1952–1965, box 9, SJC.


17For a discussion of Peg Bracken’s fan mail regarding The I Hate to Cook Book, see Jessamyn Neuhaus, Manly Meals and Mom’s Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 249–57. Does the Shirley Jackson Collection represent a reasonable sample of the total fan letters she received? There is no way to know for certain if Jackson selected fan letters to save at random, but the sum total of the archive and biographical evidence suggest an answer: it appears that Jackson was a consummate pack rat who saved drafts of her writing as well as copies of her correspondence with friends, publishers, other authors, teachers, neighbors, and even salespeople and companies that failed to live up to her standards of service. Therefore, although it would be unrealistic to claim that this is an all-inclusive collection, I believe we can infer that Jackson saved a significant portion of her fan mail.


20Fan letter to Jackson, n.d. [1953], Correspondence 1953–1955, box 46, SJC. Please note that I have maintained the informal writing, complete with original grammar, phrasing, punctuation, and spelling, in my quotations.

21Fan letter to Jackson, n.d. [1954], Correspondence 1953–1955, box 46, SJC.


23Fan letter (New York) to Jackson, n.d. [1953], “F” Miscellany, 1953–1956, box 8, SJC.

24I am indebted to one of the anonymous readers at the Journal of Women’s History for this point.

25Ibid.

26Fan letter to Jackson, n.d. [1960], “P” Miscellany, 1937–1965, box 10, SJC. In my opinion, “warm” is an inaccurate description of Jackson’s writing style. Even in her family chronicles, her writing is measured, economical, and chilly.

27Fan letter (Los Angeles) to Jackson, n.d. [1960], “L” Miscellany, 1952–1965, box 9, SJC.


33Fan letter (Missouri) to Jackson, n.d., “S” Miscellany, 1947–1965, box 11, SJC.


35Fan letter (Petaluma, CA) to Jackson, n.d. [1952], “S” Miscellany, 1947–1965, box 11, SJC.


38One reason for this glaring omission might be that children simply presented a far more visible, daily impediment to women’s individual personal and professional pursuits.


I should note that feminists today are rightly critical of such authors as Caitlin Flanagan, *The Hell With All That: Loving and Loathing Our Inner Housewife* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2006), who hypocritically blur the line between domesticity and professional careers. Flanagan and others have achieved great public success as writers and pundits by condemning other mothers who seek public success as professionals.


Diamond, “Ivory Towers and Ivory Soap,” 84.


Ibid., 164, 204.

Hall, *Shirley Jackson*, 105.

Ibid., 104.


Hall, *Shirley Jackson*, 105.


On Hyman’s abuse and infidelity, see Oppenheimer, *Private Demons*, 238; and Hattenhauer, *Shirley Jackson’s American Gothic*, 17. Jackson once stated that domestic humor allowed her to view her children through a “flattering veil of fiction”; see Oppenheimer, *Private Demons*, 119.

Hyman, *The Magic of Shirley Jackson*, 426. See Hall, *Shirley Jackson*, 75–77, for a discussion about the incident related by Jackson and its “subtext of the self struggling to declare its value.” Jackson described a similar incident in a letter to her parents, writing that at the local mothers’ club meetings “no one mentions the fact that I also write books, as though it were not polite to talk about it.” Jackson to Leslie and Geraldine Jackson, n.d., Family Correspondence, 1944–1965, box 3, SJC.

Hyman, *The Magic of Shirley Jackson*, 426. See Hall, *Shirley Jackson*, 75–77, for a discussion about the incident related by Jackson and its “subtext of the self struggling to declare its value.” Jackson described a similar incident in a letter to her parents, writing that at the local mothers’ club meetings “no one mentions the fact that I also write books, as though it were not polite to talk about it.” Jackson to Leslie and Geraldine Jackson, n.d., Family Correspondence, 1944–1965, box 3, SJC.


See, for example, Andrea Buchanan, *Mother Shock: Loving Every (Other) Minute of It* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2003); Ariel Gore, *The Essential Hip Mama: Writing From the Cutting Edge of Parenting* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2004); Ayun Halliday, *The Big Rumpus: A Mother’s Tale from the Trenches* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2002); Cathi Hanauer, ed., *The Bitch in the House: 26 Women Tell the Truth About Sex, Solitude, Work, Motherhood, and Marriage* (New York: Harper Books, 2003); and Camille Peri and Kate Moss, eds., *Mothers Who Think: Tales of Real-Life Parenthood* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2000). In addition, even a cursory exploration of today’s blogosphere reveals that women are utilizing online writing to explore the possibility of reimagining the home. There are, however, certainly problematic aspects of this burgeoning literary field, which includes memoirs, novels, and parenting manuals, as J. L. Scott argues in “Mom’s the Word: Yummy Mummies, Alternadads, and Other Literary Offspring,” *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* (Spring 2007): 71–75. She writes: “in this new world, where merely being a parent is license to write, kids are invariably drafted into service to showcase their parents’ lifestyle and tastes. . . . Moms might not be able to find meaning in the monotony of pushing toy trucks back and forth on the rug. Maybe the meaning, in the end, belongs to kids—not to be defined, analyzed, or blogged about, but just to exist” (75).