

**“She knows it is all a load of old socks”: Doris Lessing, anti-psychiatry
and bodies that matter**

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Abstract:

In *The Golden Notebook* (1962), *The Four-Gated City* (1969) and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), Doris Lessing examines the inadequacies of traditional models of madness and replaces them with an anti-psychiatric model. While ostensibly the three novels strive to conceive of madness in terms of R. D. Laing's anti-psychiatric theories, this paper will argue that they in fact serve to reveal an impasse between Laing's "lived body" (but gender neutral) theory of schizophrenia and the discursively constructed, "inscribed" bodies of Lessing's female characters. Lessing's madness novels deconstruct Laing's phallogentric approach to schizophrenia by rewriting his theory of madness as a gendered and embodied experience.

Key words

Doris Lessing; R. D. Laing; anti-psychiatry; critical psychiatry; psychoanalysis; women; gender; madness; mental illness; embodiment; *The Golden Notebook*; *The Four-Gated City*; *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*; post-war women's writing; Judith Butler.

Introduction

Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), *The Four-Gated City* (1969) and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) engage explicitly and critically with R. D. Laing's 1960s' anti-psychiatry movement; however, this extensive nine-year examination ends with the still-institutionalised madwoman and the proclamation that "she knows it is all a load of old socks" (Lessing 1982, 229). This idiosyncratic phrase was also used by Lessing in relation to another recurring theoretical and political theme in her oeuvre during this period. In her last interview with *The Telegraph* in 2008 she answered "Yes I called Marxism 'the sweetest dream' in one of my books. Then I discovered it was all a load of old socks. It seems incredible now that quite intelligent people believed in it all" (Farndale 2013). In Lessing's engagement with socialist politics, as with her engagement with feminism and other grand narratives of the Twentieth Century, there is no simple polemic to stand as her "truth;" rather her works act as an on-going examination and interrogation – a "working through" – of the viability and implications of particular political and/or philosophical positions. Her interest in mental illness and anti-psychiatry is no exception.

Mental illness has been a preoccupation of Lessing's work from her first publication, *The Grass is Singing* (1950), in which Mary Turner's sanity gradually disintegrates under the "angry sun" of the African veld until finally the "short strip of daylight" separating her from "the fatal darkness" is extinguished in the closing pages (Lessing 1994, 195). This theme comes to the fore in her 1962 novel *The Golden Notebook* in which Lessing engages with a specifically anti-psychiatric approach to madness as her heroine, Anna Wulf, faces the "chaos" of reintegrating her compartmentalised selves. In *The Four-Gated City* (1969), the final instalment in the *Children of Violence* quintet, Lessing continues to engage with Laing's notion that breakdown might in fact be *breakthrough*, moving from realism to science fiction in order to fully realise the potential of these ideas. The final text I discuss, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), is generally considered Lessing's most "Laingian" novel but I argue it is here that Lessing finally ends her contentious textual relationship with Laing and, through parody, expresses her disappointment and derision over the failed potential of anti-psychiatry, particularly for women. As with her engagement

with Marxism, what appeared to be “the sweetest dream” eventually became “a load of old socks.”

From Laing to Lessing

The term “anti-psychiatry” was coined in the UK by David Cooper in 1967 but the movement’s beginnings are to be found in the 1960 publication of *The Divided Self* by the charismatic Glaswegian psychiatrist R. D. Laing. Like Thomas Szasz in the US, Laing’s work positioned itself in direct opposition to the institutionalisation, physical treatments, drug therapy, and “brainwashing” (Laing 1988, 12) of the traditional psychiatric establishment. In its place, he envisioned a partnership between psychiatrist and patient in which the primary aim was to understand the patient’s particular sense of “being-in-the-world” and make “madness, and the process of going mad, comprehensible” (9). Instead of understanding schizophrenia as a disease to be diagnosed and cured, Laing re-imagines it as “*a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation*” (Laing 1970, 95). Caught in an “untenable position” (95) with a diminishing sense of ontological security, the patient seeks to protect the self by splitting it from the body: the schizoid’s “special strategy” is thus an increasing disengagement from the body that divides self from other through a complex system of false selves.

Although initially aimed at clinicians within the field, *The Divided Self* found an audience in a generation of anti-establishment intellectuals. Elaine Showalter describes Laing as “the mentor of the counterculture in all of its political, psychedelic, mystical, and especially artistic manifestations” (1988, 233) and Carol Klein notes that “by the mid-sixties Laing was in great demand as a lecturer, and the darling of a burgeoning television industry” (2000, 198). But the text also spoke to patients, spouses, and parents desperately wanting someone to understand their plight and expose the inadequacies of conventional treatment. However, just four years later, it was the parents who were to find themselves the subjects of Laing’s critique. In the co-authored study *Sanity, Madness and the Family* (1964), Laing and A. Esterson argued that “not the individual but the family is the unit of illness: not the individual but the family, therefore, needs the clinician’s services to ‘cure’ it” (Laing and Esterson 1970, 23). The family – particularly, but not explicitly, the

“schizophrenogenic mother” – is identified as the primary cause of the patient’s inability to establish a secure sense of “being-in-the-world.”¹ This hypothesis was further radicalised in *The Politics of Experience* in which Laing argued that what society considers mad behaviour is actually a perfectly valid and *sane* response to not simply a mad family but a mad world. It is here that Laing finally recommends his treatment: by journeying into one’s “inner space” (that is, by refusing traditional psychiatric care and allowing oneself to confront and experience “madness”) one can travel “back to the womb of all things” and return from this inner voyage with a far greater understanding and experience of the self and, indeed, the nature of humanity (1970, 106). If all people were to undertake this journey, Laing contends, the world might be cured of its madness.

The Politics of Experience sealed Laing’s fame but also his notoriety and in fact signalled the downfall of the anti-psychiatric movement; he had become, as Zbigniew Kotowicz phrases it, the “maverick guru of schizophrenics” (1997, 3). Laing was a victim of his own success as well as a victim of an emerging second-wave feminist politics: in 1972, Phyllis Chesler’s ground-breaking study, *Women and Madness*, charged Laing with remaining “unaware of the universal and objective oppression of women and its particular relation to madness in women” (1997, 126); in 1974, Juliet Mitchell’s *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* also observed his failure to take into account the “significance of patriarchal law” in favour of blaming the schizophrenogenic mother (1986, 291). Elaine Showalter (1988) and, more recently, Lisa Appignanesi (2009), have noted that Laing’s work undoubtedly contains an implicit critique of women’s socially prescribed roles during the period; however, because there is no *explicit* recognition of patriarchal law or the workings of the sex/gender system in his texts, he simply perpetuates the familiar correlation between women and madness. This oversight seems especially odd considering the extent to which Laing’s understanding of the schizophrenic experience in *The Divided Self* is bound up with the self’s relationship to the material body. The body is central to Laing’s theoretical model of the schizophrenic experience and yet oddly gender neutral; it is here that Doris Lessing’s engagement with his work becomes so crucial.

Echoes of Laing’s rhetoric and vision resonate throughout *The Golden Notebook* (published two years after *The Divided Self*), *The Four-Gated City*, and

Briefing for a Descent into Hell, which is extensively informed by Laing's *The Politics of Experience*. Indeed, Lessing identified Laing as a "key authority figure" (Hardin 1974, 154) and told Joyce Carol Oates in 1973 that "we were both exploring the phenomenon of the unclassifiable experience, the psychological 'breaking-through' that the conventional world judges as mad" (Oates 1973). Critics have tended to view this mutual interest in terms of Lessing's "ideological apprenticeship to Laing" (Sukenick 1974, 113) and the textual relationship between the two has received little critical attention since the 1980s.² Laing's texts do provide the theoretical framework for Lessing's representations of madness and her distrust of conventional psychiatric care; however, rather than an "apprenticeship," I argue that her three madness novels constitute a sustained *critique* of Laing's approach. As Showalter claimed in 1988, "the questions about Laingian women left unanswered . . . come closer to being resolved in the novels of Doris Lessing" (1988, 238). In fact, the novels not only expose and correct Laing's inattention to gender but also examine the "matter" of the sexed body, bringing anti-psychiatric thinking into dialogue with a then emerging second-wave feminist politics but also with the field's more recent preoccupation with the way in which bodies constitute identity.

***The Golden Notebook* (1962)**

The feminist credentials of Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* have been well documented and the novel continues to be lauded for its ground-breaking examination of Britain's post-war sexual politics. Lessing famously balked at the novel's reception as a tract on the "sex war" and, in her Preface to the 1971 edition, chose to emphasise what she felt was the "central theme" that had been missed: "This theme of 'breakdown,' that sometimes when people 'crack up' it is a way of self-healing, of the inner self's dismissing of false dichotomies and divisions" (Lessing 1989, 8). This might have been lifted directly from the pages of *The Politics of Experience*, it is so "Laingian" in its argument and rhetoric. But while Lessing overthrows her novel's Marxist and feminist agendas for anti-psychiatry in the Preface, the text itself continually emphasises the connections *between* these political and philosophical positions. Anna Wulf, the heroine of *The Golden Notebook*, famously describes the housewives she meets while canvassing for the

British Communist Party as “lonely women going mad quietly by themselves, in spite of husband and children or rather because of them” (Lessing, 1989, 161). This is just one explicit example of the way in which the text represents women’s madness as directly connected to women’s socially prescribed role of wife and mother in a conservative post-war Britain. Of course, the alternative presented in the novel is to be a “free woman” like Anna – but she is still a woman in therapy who begins the novel with the observation that “the point is, that as far as I can see, everything’s cracking up” (25).

As “free women,” Lessing’s female characters attempt to resist the “exchange market” power dynamic described by Luce Irigaray 15 years later: “Woman is never anything but the locus of a more or less competitive exchange between two men” and so “for women to undertake tactical strikes” they must “keep themselves apart from men long enough to learn to defend their desire ... to forge themselves a social status that compels recognition, to earn their living in order to escape from the condition of prostitute” (1991, 355-356). Anna and her friend Molly employ these strategies by raising children outside of the confines of marriage, earning their own living, actively engaging in politics, and privileging relationships between women over those with men; but they nevertheless find that they cannot escape the binds of the heterosexual matrix. In Anna’s novel, for instance, when her heroine Ella considers discussing with her female friend a sexual encounter with a married man, she “decides not to indulge in these conversations with Julia, thinking that two women, friends on a basis of criticism of men are Lesbian, psychologically if not physically” (1989, 401). Anna represents her heroine as acutely aware of, and influenced by, the laws that govern relationships with other women. Ella’s refusal to enter into a lesbian relationship with Julia, even if that lesbianism is “psychological” rather than emotional or physical, emphasises the difficulty of escaping both those discourses that situate women as mere commodities between men and those normative discourses of gender and sexuality which institute “compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler 1999, xxix).

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that

the “coherence” and “continuity” of “the person” are not logical or analytical features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility. . . . “Intelligible” genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire. (1999, 23)

Lessing’s women are caught within the “heterosexualization of desire” (Butler 1999, 23) produced through regulatory practices; even as they try to create a space outside of those laws that prescribe and fix gender norms, they find themselves reconsolidating them. Caught within a system which offers only certain kinds of legitimate subjectivity, Lessing’s “free women” run just as much risk of turning into unintelligible “mad creatures” as the housewives and mothers “alone in ... their completely functional marriages” (Duras 1975, 431). But by re-writing the madwoman in terms of both a feminist agenda *and* an anti-psychiatric model of madness, Lessing’s novel attempts to rethink and move beyond those discourses which constitute intelligible subjectivities.

Models of Madness

To pave the way for an anti-psychiatric response to the connections between gender and mental illness, *The Golden Notebook* sets about examining and detailing the inadequacies of the conventional models of madness: the medical model and the psychoanalytical model. Anna, who is a recipient of psychoanalysis, is acutely aware of the limitations of this particular model. Her psychoanalyst’s methods, rooted in Freudian and Jungian theory, reduce individual experience into one example from a collection of “origin” stories. All women adhere to a handful of mythic figures – Electra, Antigone, Cassandra – whose tragic stories they unconsciously repeat. Anna can for the most part “name” herself but what she wants to do – and her therapist fails to do – is consider her “experience, a memory, a dream, in *modern terms*” (Lessing 1989, 48; my italics). Rachel Bowlby critiques psychoanalysis’ tendency to overlook the importance of modern social contexts in a world now “opened up to women in social life, in principle and in practice. . . . It seems anachronistic and needlessly hopeless now to cling to a myth in which women’s most fundamental

conflicts are determined by the realization that they are women, not men” (2007, 167-168). The stories psychoanalysis offers to Lessing’s “free women” do not sufficiently explain their dis-ease because they do not understand it as a response to the modern world in which she must function. In addition, as Foucault has argued, such “discourses, and the practices based on them, have played more of a role in the normalization of the modern individual than they have in any liberatory processes’ (Sawicki 1991, 23).³ Anna’s experience of psychoanalysis thus only offers her a narrative of her normalisation and its discontents.

Anti-psychiatry, on the other hand, is primarily interested in the patient’s *current* social situation and the strategies for managing that situation. Anna articulates this to her analyst: “I’m going to make the obvious point that perhaps the word neurotic means the condition of being highly conscious and developed. . . . People stay sane by blocking off, by limiting themselves” (Lessing 1989, 413). Anna interprets her “neurotic” behaviours as conscious and strategic responses to the ways in which her (modern) situation is characterised by contradiction, conflict and ambivalence. The text, although without mentioning the movement, succinctly states the primary tenet of anti-psychiatric thinking: what seems like sanity is actually madness and what seems like madness is actually a sane response to what has become an insane world – a world which requires one to accept that insanity as normal in order to survive.

The medical model of madness is less visible in *The Golden Notebook* than it will be in Lessing’s next madness novel, *The Four-Gated City*. In fact, its very absence testifies to Lessing’s belief that it is not a viable option for Anna. The medical model contends that mental illness is a biological illness and thus seeks to treat the body to “right” the mind. Historically this has resulted in a pervasive myth about the effects of the unruly female body on the fragile female mind. Such associations have now been thoroughly examined by feminist thinkers in a variety of fields and “advances in the field of medicine, neuroscience, clinical psychiatry and psychoanalysis have all but eclipsed the crude image of the ‘wandering womb’ . . . acting as an enormous sponge which sucked the life-energy of intellect from vulnerable women” (Ussher 1991, 74). Wandering womb’s aside, traditional models of madness continue to perpetuate an implicit but pervasive correlation between the female sex and

madness. Paradoxically, one of the ways in which *The Golden Notebook* registers this association is in its representation of *male* madness, firstly with Tommy, Molly's son, and later with Saul, Anna's lover. Tommy's story is particularly revealing.

Part way through the novel, Tommy attempts suicide by shooting himself in the head; the text suggests that in doing so he has effectively performed his own lobotomy. This accidental surgery seemingly cures him of his schizoid tendencies. While Molly calls him a "Zombie" (Lessing 1989, 335) and Anna notes that "his voice, like his movements, [were] slow, full and controlled, every word authorized by a methodical brain" (332), his nurses call him a "model patient" (331). Indeed, Tommy is a model patient of the medical model. After the failed suicide attempt, the now blinded Tommy is suddenly transformed from a severely ontologically insecure individual (to use Laing's terminology) to a rational, logical, and controlled young man: he is all "masculine intelligence" (to use Lessing's terminology (Lessing 1981, 253)). Anna and Molly, who are experts in the psychoanalytical model, expect to see a castrated, "mutilated boy" (Lessing 1989, 334) but instead – by way of the medical model – he becomes "the centre of the house, dominating it, conscious of everything that went on it, a blind but all-conscious presence" (334). Tommy's embracing of the medical model is also an embracing of the Cartesian division between mind and body – a model that subordinates the (weak, vulnerable, feminine) body to the (superior, transcendent, masculine) mind – a mind that disavows the workings and processes of the body: in this case, sight. As Tommy positions himself on the right side of the sane/mad, male/female, mind/body binaries, Anna and Molly find themselves on the other: when the blinded Tommy "looks" at Anna, she responds "with a touch of hysteria" (449) while Molly is all "hysterical tears" (334) and bodily processes: "she put her face in her hands and wept, differently, through her whole body ... the bones showed, thin and sharp" (335). Grosz writes that "in appropriating the realm of mind for themselves, men have nonetheless required a support and cover for their now-disavowed physicality. Women thus function as *the* body for men" (1995, 38). As Tommy takes refuge in the sane, male mind, his mother and Anna are relegated to the hysterical, female body. Lessing's novel does not simply demonstrate how madness and gender are historically and culturally connected but reveals how discourses of madness and gender in fact *consolidate* one another: madness and

gender are inextricably linked because of the very madness of gender. It is little wonder that Anna is so attracted to anti-psychiatry's supposedly gender neutral alternative to these models of madness.

The Matter of the Body

In opposition to the two dominant models of madness, Laing dismisses the notion that either the body or the mind is the point of "origin," and instead focuses on the patient's "*being-in-the-world*" (Laing 1988, 19). What becomes clear in *The Divided Self* is that one's experience of being-in-the-world is always caught up with the way in which one perceives of oneself as *being-in-the-body*. Laing's thesis in this respect is straightforward: the ontologically secure (sane) person experiences the body as part of the self; the ontologically insecure (schizoid) person experiences the body as part of the world of others and thus strives to become an "unembodied self" (65). Laing writes that "instead of being the core of his true self, the body is felt as the core of a *false self*, which a detached, disembodied, 'inner,' 'true' self looks on at with tenderness, amusement, or hatred as the case may be" (69). Sanity, then, is the phenomenological experience of selfhood where mind and body are unified, Merleau-Ponty's "body-as-it-is-lived-by-me" (Grosz 1994, 86); schizophrenia, on the other hand, literally enacts the Cartesian rift between mind and body.

Laing, drawing on existential-phenomenology, views the body as a "lived body," constructed by way of the psyche's projection of "the body-schema" (Grosz 1995, 33) onto its surface. According to Grosz, the concept of the "lived body" is "prevalent in psychology, especially psychoanalysis and phenomenology" and "refers largely to the lived experience of the body, the body's *internal* and *psychic* inscription" (1995, 33). Laing's troubling of the Cartesian self/body binary, and by extension that binary's lateral association with sanity/madness, has the potential to radically rethink the ways in which the experience of schizophrenia can be understood; indeed, *The Divided Self* did just that. But what *The Divided Self* and Laing's subsequent texts fail to do is to account for how this mind-body relationship can operate from within a sex/gender system that constructs male and female subjectivity so differently. In Laing's works, bodies are treated as if gender neutral but, as Young and Grosz argue, "lived bodies" are "*always, already* sexually coded"

(36). Indeed, Lessing's heroines are clearly "*always, already*" sexed and their bodies thus lend themselves more readily to the "inscriptive" approach to embodiment (33). The inscriptive model, Grosz explains, is "derived from Nietzsche, Kafka, Foucault, and Deleuze" and "conceives the body as a surface on which social law, morality, and values are inscribed" (33). This inscriptive approach renders the body into a decipherable text while simultaneously generating a sense of "an interior, an underlying depth, individuality, or consciousness" (34). The implication for feminist theory, as Butler has argued, is that bodies, and thus subjects, are discursively constructed to meet the expectations of a patriarchal, heterosexual matrix. For women this has meant embodying the devalued side of a litany of binary oppositions, not least the body itself. As Iris Marion Young has argued, 'the relations between immanence and transcendence, between owning and being a body, between subject and object or one subject and another, are not the same for women as for men' (Grosz 1994, 108). Lessing encounters this fundamental problem when she attempts to represent Anna's schizophrenic experience in terms of Laing's notion of unembodiment, a deviation from his (sane) "lived body" ideal.

Towards the end of the novel Anna has a dream in which she finds herself looking down on her empty body. A parade of characters from earlier in the novel enter the room and "try to fit themselves into Anna's body. I stood to one side, watched, interested to see who would come into the room next" (Lessing 1989, 522). Anna's detached "interest" suggests that, in accordance with Laing's understanding of schizoid experience, she does not consider her body to be part of her "self" but rather part of the world of others. This situation changes when Paul, an old lover and now dead, walks into the room and "dissolved into her" (522). When Anna's body is "filled with the dead Paul" her unembodied "inner self" is threatened with complete "disintegration" (523). As a ghost, Paul is the ultimate transcendent male and his possession of her body reads as rape, with her body the passive receptacle for his disavowed materiality. Anna, from outside of herself, must "f[igh]t to re-enter her" body (522), and reclaim it from Paul whose "cool grave smile" animates "Anna's face" (523). When the dream continues, Anna is separated from her body once again and finds her "brain" in the head of an Algerian soldier, her "skin dark" but her mind her own (523). When suddenly her mind goes out "like

a candle flame” terror drives her from his body and she experiences “the flying dream” (523) and is once more unembodied; this does not last and she is driven to find another body within which to lodge, this time the body of a young, pregnant Chinese peasant. Just as Paul entered her body, so she now enters this body. As in the soldier’s body, the Anna-brain thinks its “mechanical thoughts” but this time she actively wills her mind to “flicker and wane” (524), to finally overcome her fear and accept disintegration. Once again, terror drives her out and she wakes up: “with a weary sense of duty I became Anna, like putting on a soiled dress” (524).

Anna’s dream can be read as a failed attempt at schizoid unembodiment but that does not mean it is a triumph of the “lived body” either; when Anna awakes, mind and body are not unified. She is “cold, cold” (523) and her body feels like a “soiled dress” as opposed to “being flesh and blood and bones, of being biologically alive and real” (Laing 1988, 67). Ruth Saxton argues that Lessing “perpetuates a deep schism between mind and body, in which the female body is seen as a shell that severely limits woman’s experience and both distorts and disguises her identity” (1994, 95). Indeed, the different bodies here offer themselves like a series of shells, or dresses to use Lessing’s metaphor, each one a signifier of some combination of gender, race and/or class oppression; but they don’t disguise “identity,” they produce it. Both the “lived” and “inscriptive” models read the body as a site of inscription – the first originating from an interior “self” that constructs the body in terms of an “imaginary anatomy” (Grosz 1994, 33) and the second from external socio-political forces that mark, sculpt, libidimize, medicalize, mechanize and, significantly, normalize the body according to dominant discourses of intelligibility. Grosz writes:

It is not clear to me that these two approaches are compatible or capable of synthesis. . . . The body can be regarded as a kind of *hinge* or threshold: it is placed between a psychic or lived interiority and a more socio-political exteriority that produces interiority through the *inscription* of the body’s outer surface. Where psychoanalysis and phenomenology focus on the body as it is experienced and rendered meaningful, the inscriptive model is more concerned with the processes by which the subject is marked, scarred,

transformed, and written upon or constructed by the various regimes of institutional, discursive, and nondiscursive power as a particular kind of body. (33)

When Anna enters the bodies of others, the inscription seemingly comes from within: it is Anna's brain that forms the body, just as it is Paul's ghost that possesses and animates the Anna body; however, the brain makes sense of the body through its "progressive and liberal" (524) ideas, making it signify by reference to the external cultural codes, politics and histories which determine its existence and value. Paul and Anna's body-hopping suggests an arbitrary relationship between mind and body – and, as Butler will later argue, gender and sex – but at the same time the body is shown to be wholly constitutive of subjectivity. While Laing's work offers Lessing the concept of the "lived body" and the potential to see beyond gender by adopting a phenomenological framework, as Toril Moi would later advocate in her essay 'What is a Woman?' (1999), Anna's dream keeps returning to bodies inscribed and made intelligible by socio-political exteriority. Anna will continue to wear her "soiled dress" and, in the closing pages, when she emerges from her madness, it is only to once more "become Anna, Anna the responsible" (564). *The Golden Notebook* thus reveals an impasse between Laing's theory and Lessing's understanding of female, embodied experience, schizoid or otherwise.

The Four-Gated City (1969)

In the late 1960s both Laing and Lessing published books with a much more optimistic view of schizophrenia and its potential. As early as *The Divided Self*, Laing alluded to the idea that the "cracked mind of the schizophrenic may *let in* light which does not enter the intact minds of many sane people whose minds are closed" (Laing 1988, 27). Lessing offers a (very) similar sentiment in *The Golden Notebook* when Anna tells her therapist that "sometimes I meet people, and it seems to me the fact they are cracked across, they're split, means they are keeping themselves open for something" (1989, 416). In these early works, neither writer pursues this line of thinking but in the spirit of the later 1960s both shift their focus from a rather clinical and gloomy description of schizophrenic experience to a far more fantastical and

Utopian assessment of its potential. For Laing, this takes the form of the restorative “inner journey” where the schizophrenic – now voyager – undergoes a transformative journey and an “existential rebirth” (Laing 1970, 106). For Lessing – who will examine this inner journey in more detail in her later novel, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* – the focus remains on the relationship between madness and the gendered body but this time in terms of how mind and body might work together to access higher planes of consciousness and usher in a new stage of human evolution. *The Four-Gated City* attempts to realise the unfulfilled hopes of *The Golden Notebook* by gradually deconstructing the discourses which inscribe Anna and produce her gendered subjectivity.

According to Butler, cracks in the performance of intelligible subjectivity allow for new possibilities. Butler asks “even if heterosexist constructs circulate as the available sites of power/discourse from which to do gender at all, the question remains: What possibilities of recirculation exist? Which possibilities of doing gender repeat and displace through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion, and proliferation the very constructs by which they are mobilized?” (1999, 41-42). Madness, the “cracked mind,” might momentarily disrupt the performance of intelligible subjectivity but it is readily absorbed back into systems of normality through the labelling and categorisation of mental illnesses via conventional psychiatry, hence Anna’s return to her body and “normality” at the end of *The Golden Notebook*. However, by rejecting those labels – by exposing the fallacy of such labelling, as Laing does in *The Politics of Experience* – the potential for madness to be reimagined, and thus for intelligible subjectivity to be reimagined, is a possibility once more. As Butlerian “spectres of discontinuity and incoherence” (23), Lessing’s female characters in *The Four-Gated City* threaten to “crack open” – or deconstruct – the notion of intelligible subjectivity.

At the beginning of *The Four-Gated City*, Martha, cloaked in a long “heavy black coat” (Lessing 1981, 16), wanders the streets of London; she has no home, job, dependents or attachments. As she moves anonymously and androgynously across the city, “without boundaries, without definition” (14), Martha enters a new physical state; this state is produced through lack of sleep and food, methodical exercise, or highly ritualised acts of sexual intercourse uncomplicated by love or attachment. By

entering into this particular way of *being-in-the-world* she is able to access different planes of consciousness in which she can “see” the past and future. The body – and the management of bodily mechanics – is essential to this process; as Jean Pickering points out, it is “through the medium of the flesh [that] Martha attains her first truly visionary experience” (1980, 26). But it is also made possible because of the way in which her body exists as an uninscribed surface – unmarked by the social order that Martha has momentarily escaped.

When Martha relinquishes this freedom and anonymity to gain employment, she is forced to look elsewhere for access to these other planes of consciousness and, through her encounters with the quintessential career-madwoman, Lynda, she slowly begins to recognise the potential of schizophrenia. In order to become Butler’s unintelligible “spectre,” Martha experiments with using madness to separate her sense of self from both her female body and her “masculine intelligence” (Lessing 1981, 253), the same “intelligence” the Anna-brain used to inscribe the bodies in which she dwelled, including her own. In doing so, Martha gradually sheds the discourses that construct her as intelligible to emerge as a resistant subject. Martha, who has already abandoned her daughter in an earlier instalment of the series, now also rejects her mother’s attempts at reconciliation, extricating herself from the matrilineal line of female inheritance of gendered social norms;⁴ she also rejects Mark (her lover) and her (hetero)sexual identity, favouring instead a woman-woman relationship with Mark’s mad wife, Lynda. Saxton describes this as a “post-erotic friendship which replaces the erotic with a spiritual or political energy understood as healing” (1994, 116). Martha sacrifices her daughter, her mother, her sexuality and her intelligibility as a gendered subject; she also slowly removes herself from family, politics and society, choosing to descend into Lynda’s basement.

Unencumbered by gender, sex or structures of meaning predicated on difference, Martha escapes inscription and is able to access the “lived body” – the body as produced through “*psychic* inscription” (Grosz 1995, 33). Indeed, in a rewriting of Anna’s failed experience of unembodiment, Martha is now able to transform her body into “an elderly man,” “a young man,” “a small white horse,” or a “tree, a glittering faceted individuality of breathing green,” all imbued with “the

sense of herself [that] had no sex” (Lessing 1981, 243). This gender-neutral self is free to become “the instrument, the receiving device” able to generate that “sensitive state” (56) of receptiveness and psychic energy which allows Martha to communicate telepathically and see the future. This later novel proves Anna’s hypothesis – at last the people who “are cracked across,” “keeping themselves open for something” (Lessing 1989, 416), have succeeded in finding that “something.” However, when Martha emerges from the basement she is confronted with “a near-race of half, uncompleted creatures . . . sleep-walking” through life in their “hideously defective bodies” (Lessing 1981, 521, 522). Just as Anna scurries back to her body, so Martha scurries back to the basement, appalled by the abomination that is humankind. The text is left with two choices: register Martha’s breakthrough as an individual triumph but a revolutionary failure, or destroy them all. Lessing chooses the latter and the hitherto realist novel gives way to a post-apocalyptic world.

In *The Politics of Experience* Laing calls for *all* of humankind to undergo the transformative inner journey to enlightenment but such a utopian fantasy is replaced in Lessing’s novel with the (much easier) dystopian apocalypse. With a severely depleted population the “new normal” can flourish and give birth to a race of superhumans, psychically connected across space and time. Humankind takes a leap forwards, which is really a leap back: an “undoing” of all the crippling practices and discourses of the Golden Age. But all of this is only possible through apocalypse. Lessing’s novel realises the potential of Laing’s reimagining of madness, of the potential of the “lived body,” but she has to all but end the world to do it.

***Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971)**

The Golden Notebook ends without finding an escape from gendered discourses of madness or the madness of gendered discourses, and *The Four-Gated City* can only envision a way beyond these through a relinquishing of the markers of female embodiment (children, mothers, sex, heterosexual love) and a fantasy of apocalypse. Lessing’s final and ostensibly most Laingian madness novel is thus charged with either resolving or consolidating the impasse between Laing’s theories and Lessing’s politics. At first glance, the difficulty of translating theory into fiction seems to have

been solved by a decision to simply narrativise one of Laing's case studies. The framework for the protagonist's story in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, despite Lessing's claims to the contrary, is lifted straight from the pages of Laing's *The Politics of Experience* and his account of Jesse Watkins' "Ten Day Voyage."⁵ Laing introduces Watkins' story as a "an account of his voyage into inner space and time" (Laing 1970, 120) and it is presented as a successful example of Laing's notion of the schizophrenic inner journey to enlightenment as healing. In addition, both writers have seemingly abandoned the madwomen of their previous works to embrace the figure of the male hero.

The inner journey is described by Laing in terms of a male, adventure-narrative; the supposedly gender-neutral schizophrenics of *The Divided Self* and *Sanity, Madness and the Family* (who were mostly women) disappear to be replaced by a new supposedly gender-neutral brave voyager (who is clearly male). He is the "voyager, the explorer, the climber, the space man" (Laing 1970, 105). The madwoman appears only as the sad, tortured patient of Emil Kraepelin whose account of a psychiatric examination Laing draws upon to reiterate his earlier argument: that madness can be made comprehensible if we acknowledge the patient's particular sense of "being-in-the-world" and that conventional psychiatric models are inadequate, harmful and its methods crazier than the patients it purports to cure. Thus, in *The Politics of Experience*, the madwoman appears as a victim of the old system but never as a voyager in this new incarnation of madness. The shift from the psychotic to the psychedelic, as Peter Sedgwick has argued, "was an inevitable move in [Laing's] campaign to upgrade the status of the apparently abnormal and insane" without which "we are left with the position that the schizophrenic is a disabled victim . . . whose basic perceptions and reactions can only to a limited degree be understood in terms of 'intelligibility'" (1971, 43). This "upgrade" also appears to necessitate a shift in gender: when madness becomes reimagined as a perilous and exciting adventure, an "ancient quest, with its pitfalls and dangers" (Laing 1970, 112), it becomes man's work.

Problematically, Lessing's final madness novel also registers this shift – the Annas, Lyndas and Marthas of her previous texts are replaced with her own male

adventurer. Featuring a male protagonist may have been a way of circumnavigating the prominence critics tended to give the theme of the “sex war” in her novels, but it might also have been a strategic choice in terms of her subject matter.⁶ Mona Knapp argues that “Lessing’s choice of a male protagonist contributes to the book’s force, since society often stamps hysteria and irrationality as intrinsically female traits” (1984, 106). Likewise, Lynn Sukenick “suspects . . . that a man was chosen in order to give madness its fullest due and its deepest persuasion” (1974, 116). Lessing’s decision, then, may have arisen out of a desire for her novel, which was already pushing at the limits of literary merit by moving into the fantasy/science fiction genre, to be taken seriously. By shedding the hysterical women of her previous texts and constructing her narrative through the perspective of the mad *but male* hero (white, middle-class and a university Professor to boot), Lessing increases the credibility of her (and Laing’s) alternative theory of madness.

Interestingly, because of this switch in the main protagonist’s gender, Sydney Janet Kaplan and Elaine Showalter both dismissed the significance of sex/gender for readings of the schizophrenic experience in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*. Kaplan writes that “the issue of sexuality seems to have been eliminated from *Briefing*” (1974, 120) and Showalter argues that it “does not make connections between female powerlessness and schizophrenia” because “Lessing’s novels were no longer concerned with the schizophrenic journey as a woman’s exploration of self” (1988, 241). But this too readily discounts the sex/gender politics that do remain at play in this novel and remain of significance to understanding the relationship between Laing’s radical revision of madness in *The Politics of Experience* and gendered embodiment in Lessing’s novels. I am offering an alternative interpretation of Lessing’s decision to shift to a male hero and of the sex/gender politics in this novel. I read *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* as a parody of Laing’s *The Politics of Experience* – one which deliberately chooses a male hero (significantly also named Watkins) to expose the gender bias of Laing’s work, as well as registering his abandonment and betrayal of the madwomen who remain not only the “disabled victims” of conventional psychiatric care, but who are forced to bear the collateral damage of the male hero’s journey and rebirth.

The Inner Journey

There are two interwoven halves to *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*: one takes place in the “real” world of the psychiatric institution and the other takes place in the “cosmic” world of Charles’ inner journey. It is through Charles’ encounters with women during both the cosmic narrative thread and the real world thread that the text produces a feminist critique of Laing’s inner journey. What both narratives register is the necessity of the presence of the female body for Charles’ ability to embark upon his transcendent journey. In the cosmic narrative this is established from the very beginning – as he sets off on his boat (he is the Captain) the men wave to the women they leave behind, most notably “Conchita” who sings for the sailors (Lessing 1982, 20). Conchita – meaning conception, and more specifically the immaculate conception (Sheehan 2001, 69) – is the ideal of female embodiment: a reproductive but chaste body, imprisoned on an island, waiting for the male hero to return. The island women are earthbound whilst Charles is not only seabound but skybound – destined to ascend into the crystal/cosmos to then later descend as a god-like saviour. The beginning of this cosmic narrative returns us to a series of binary oppositions: male/female, mind/body, active/passive, free/imprisoned, cosmic/earthbound, transcendent/embodied. For Charles to be the transcendent male hero, free to ascend to the cosmos, he must renounce his own materiality and displace it onto the women. Grosz writes that “men are able to dominate knowledge paradigms because women take on the function of representing the *body, the irrational, the natural*, or other epistemologically devalued binary terms. By positioning women as *the body*, they can project themselves and their products as *disembodied, pure, and uncontaminated*” (1995, 42). From within Charles’ “*disembodied, pure and uncontaminated*” anti-psychiatric inner space, the female body asserts itself as the embodied, impure, and contaminated matter he has disavowed. Just as the medical model allowed Tommy to occupy the transcendent, unembodied realm of “masculine intelligence,” so now anti-psychiatry makes recourse to the male-mind/female-body binary associations in order to formulate the inner journey.

The evidence for Lessing’s text as parodic is in the numerous correlations between the two works – Charles’ surname, the presence of the sea voyage, the very

language of the text⁷ – but it is most clearly represented as a feminist critique in the way in which Lessing chooses to narrate the critical stage of Charles’ inner journey: “from being outside (post-birth) back into the womb of all things (pre-birth)” (Laing 1970, 106). Lessing does not choose to do this through infantilisation (as in Jesse’s account where he regresses until he “had no brain at all” and “felt as if I were like a baby” (124)) but rather registers this stage through Charles’ encounter with a hostile natural environment:

For it was now evident that ahead of me was a narrow cleft. . . . I went up into it. . . . Now I had to squirm my way up, my feet on one wall, my back and shoulders against the other. It was a slow, painful process . . . The evil-smelling cleft I had come through now seemed to have had no real part in my journey, for its dark and constriction seemed foreign to the vast clear space of the way I had been. (Lessing 1982, 44-45)

Instead of presenting a narrative of regression, Lessing foregrounds the body through which “existential rebirth” (Laing 1970, 106) is made possible. Charles’ journey as metaphorical rebirth – out of the dense forest (womb), up the steep mountainside (birthing canal), his “slow, painful” “squirm[ing]” through the “evil-smelling cleft” (vagina) and final exposure on a ledge from which he looks back at the “vast clear space” of the East (the world) – clearly isn’t subtle. The text constructs a female body from the natural environment – one that is “evil-smelling,” “dark,” “constrict[ing]” and “foreign.” When he emerges he recognises his reflection in the glassy surface of the rock and enters the Symbolic, separating himself from the cleft (the mother’s body) and allowing him to ascend the cliff face: “I had to go up” (Lessing 1982, 45). Shortly afterwards he will enter civilisation in the form of the ruined city. The female-nature/male-culture binaries are clearly demarcated and Lessing represents how the former is the foreign Other which makes possible the male entry to language, civilisation and knowledge. Charles’ existential rebirth is predicated on woman’s embodiment – she is the condition by which he can journey into enlightenment and the site upon which he can discard his own materiality. Lessing’s text exposes the tension between the phallogocentrism of the quest

narrative – in which the female body is an obstacle through which to pass, to leave behind, and to define oneself against – and Laing’s claims to universality.

A second encounter with the female body during the cosmic narrative makes a further connection between women, the body and madness. Before Charles is absorbed into the light of the crystal, he stumbles upon three women. The women are archetypes – Shakespeare’s weird sisters – who lure him into their bloody orgy-feast. As Jeanette King has observed, Charles is “‘moonstruck,’ ‘mooncrazed,’ ‘lunatic.’ His sudden consciousness of a smell of blood implicitly connects the moon’s phases with the female menstrual cycle, underlining the traditional association between the moon, female sexuality, and insanity” (1989, 56). Female lunacy is portrayed as monstrous, carnal, chaotic and bodily – and as such is set in stark contrast, and as a danger, to Charles’ spiritual and transcendent anti-psychiatric journey. The differences between the two versions of madness couldn’t be less ambiguous or more overstated. The madwoman is flesh, unholy and bloody, ready to eat her own children; the madman is mind, soon to become “a shape in light” (Lessing 1982, 89) akin to de Beauvoir’s notion of the “pure Idea, the One, the All, the absolute spirit” (1997, 177).

Another Dress and Old Socks

While the cosmic narrative thread uses archaic metaphors, stock characters and hyperbole to parody Laing’s work, the real world narrative thread takes a much subtler approach, easily overlooked. Indeed, readings of *Briefing of a Descent into Hell* take little notice of Violet Stoke, a peripheral character who surfaces at the end of the book and seems to figure as a character akin to the nineteenth-century madwoman traditionally resigned to the margins of textual representation: a mere plot device. Violet is a young schizophrenic whom Charles befriends during his stay at the hospital and she functions as his female equivalent. If Charles is the “everyman” she, like Lynda in *The Four-Gated City*, is the “every-schizo-woman.” The two characters represent the two poles of madness: one which readily translates into Laing’s re-imagining of madness as a journey to enlightenment and one which represents madness as female, embodied and irreversibly “shipwrecked.”

Before anything is revealed about Violet's character the reader is offered a lengthy description of her appearance, beginning from the top and working its way down. The upper half of Violet "conform[s] both to our current ideas about beauty in women, and that moment's fashion" (Lessing 1982, 226). This upper half is the ideal of chaste femininity: she wears a dress with a high neck and long sleeves. But the text then reveals that the dress is a mini-dress, and the lower half is offered in stark contrast to the upper:

The girl's legs were not quite bare. She wore extremely fine, pale-grey tights. But she did not wear any panties. She sat with her legs sprawled apart in a way that suggested that she had forgotten about them, or that she had enough to do to control and manage the top half of her, without all the trouble of remembering her legs and her sex as well. Her private parts were evident as a moist dark fuzzy patch, and their exposure gave her a naïve, touching, appealing look. (227)

The nurses observe that "her way of sitting there, dressed in a parody of a housekeeper's dress with her sex on view was a challenge to their sanity" (228). The use of the word parody and the suggestion that exposed female genitals might cause insanity emphasise Violet's function in the narrative – she is there to expose the continuing link between female embodiment and madness and mock Laing's attempts to circumvent her presence in his reimagining of madness. Violet does this by being *too* female. Just "sitting there," Violet is a troubling figure, reminiscent of Anna in the final pages of *The Golden Notebook* when, after re-entering her body as if a "soiled dress," she lays with her "private parts" a "wet sticky centre" that "seemed disgusting" (Lessing 1989, 532). However, instead of trying to escape the virgin/whore binary, as Anna does in her attempts to be a "free woman," Violet tries to encompass both; in doing so, she becomes uncanny and disturbing – mad. She is, quite literally, a "divided self" with that divide drawn across her midsection, separating her reproductive organs from the upper, more "proper" self.

Violet's madness then is a madness that is quite clearly represented in terms of the impossibility of attempting to simultaneously encompass those two opposing

poles of intelligible womanhood. The year after Lessing published *Briefing*, Phyllis Chesler argued that madness is understood either in terms of one's gender failing to correspond to the sexed body (female bodies exhibiting masculine behaviours, for instance) or simply being *too* female, as in this case: "women who fully act out the conditioned female role are clinically viewed as 'neurotic' or 'psychotic'" (1997, 93). Chesler's understanding of madness looks ahead to Judith Butler's central thesis in *Gender Trouble*: that is, when "gender does not follow from sex," or when the gender performance goes so far as to parody its "natural" sex, the person then becomes a "developmental failure" with the potential to "expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility" (1999, 24). Violet is this "developmental failure" and as such is Lessing's greatest indictment against anti-psychiatry's claim to revolutionary power and universality.

The importance of Violet's appearance at the end of the novel is made clear by what appears to be a metafictional break in the narrative. The impersonal narrator, describing Violet's presence on the ward, digresses and starts to muse on Goya's early paintings and their disturbing, uncanny quality – a quality, the narrator explains, that comes from having one person in the picture stare back at the spectator:

This person who refuses to conform to the conventions of the picture the artist has set him in, questions and in fact destroys the convention. It is as if the artist said to himself: I suppose I've got to paint this kind of picture, it is expected of me – but I'll show them. As you stand and gaze in, all the rest of the picture fades away, the charmers in their smiles and flounces, the young heroes, the civilization, all those dissolve away because of that long straight gaze from the one who looks back out of the canvas and says silently that he or she knows it is all a load of old socks. . . . The eyes of Violet Stoke had the same effect, that of negating the rest of her appearance – and perhaps of saying the same thing. (Lessing 1982, 229-230)

Indeed, it is Violet, with her "long straight gaze," who breaks through in the final pages to negate the rest of the narrative. By the end of the novel, the charming,

young(ish) hero and the civilizations and places he has seen during his inner journey, “fade[] away.” In fact, Charles doesn’t even fulfil Laing’s journey or his “cosmic” mission – in the real world narrative his eventual cure comes from electroshock therapy. Charles returns to his wife, his children and his career, back to where the world determines that he – a white, heterosexual male – belongs. And Violet, with her too female body, remains where she belongs: institutionalised, neither able to access the inner journey to enlightenment nor adapt herself to a coherent, legitimate gender identity. Her stare, her body, her femaleness, destabilises the rest of the narrative, calling attention to herself and, in “refus[ing] to conform . . . questions and in fact destroys the convention.” And this is Lessing breaking the surface of the narrative too. Suddenly we have an impersonal narrator who, like Violet, calls attention to the convention and exposes her parodic approach to “the kind of [novel] expected of me.” Lessing’s long and detailed examination of the potential of anti-psychiatry over three novels and nine years ends here, with the author breaking through to say, alas, it “was all a load of old socks” after all.

Conclusion

In 2013, Lorna Sage’s obituary acknowledged the ways in which Lessing “allowed herself to be inconsistent” and “seemed open to change in a new way:”

Even her talent for demolition and her habit of cutting her losses were not to be relied upon. She was adept at tracing *sly signs of continuity* where that particular path through the narrative woods had been overgrown and bypassed time, out of mind – not least by Lessing. (Sage 2013)

Anti-psychiatry was “overgrown” and “bypassed” in her work by the mid-1970s, at which point the anti-psychiatry movement and its cultural figurehead, R. D. Laing, had also fallen out of fashion. In Lessing’s 1979 novel, *Shikasta*, Johor reports that he knows what it is to “accept failure, final and irreversible, of an effort or experiment” (Lessing 1986, 13); this could easily refer to Lessing’s attempts to reconcile Laing’s theories with her understanding of female experience. It is therefore all the more

significant that, in her final work, *Alfred and Emily* (2008), over 35 years later, Lessing returns to the subject of mental illness:

It was a serious business ... *neurotic mothers, driving their daughters mad ...*
So, how did these *pathetic demented women* come about? Well, we knew. . .
. *These were women who should have been working, should have worked,*
should have interests in their lives apart from us, their hag-ridden daughters.
... I look back at the mothers of my generation and shudder and think, Oh, my
God, never, never let it happen again... (Lessing 2008, 190-191)

In *Alfred and Emily*, Lessing provides her final word on the question of post-war women's madness. It is characteristic of Lessing that she chooses to recover the most controversial aspect of the anti-psychiatry movement's thesis – the “schizophrenogenic mother” – but what Lessing makes clear is that this mother is not a “species” but a symptom of the gendered discursive practices that governed a particular time and place. Lessing's madness novels ultimately discredited and discarded Laing's reimagining of madness and the potential of the inner journey for the madwomen – what remains, though, is the recognition that madness results from untenable lives, particularly for women struggling against inscribed conceptions of a selfhood they do not recognise or cannot fulfil – “Oh, my God,” she says “never, never let it happen again...”

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Notes

¹ The term "schizophrenogenic mother" was coined by the German psychiatrist Frieda Fromm-Reichmann in 1948 (Frith and Johnstone 2003, 111). In *The Politics of Experience*, Laing writes that "if the patients were *disturbed* their families were often very *disturbing*. . . . At first the focus was mainly on the mothers (who are always the first to get blamed for everything), and a 'schizophrenogenic' mother was postulated, who was supposed to generate disturbance in the child" (1970, 93). As he back-tracks, Laing fails to mention here that he and Esterson greatly contributed to this narrative in *Sanity, Madness and the Family*.

² The exception is Roberta Rubenstein's *Literary Half-Lives: Doris Lessing, Clancy Sigal, and Roman à Clef* (2014), a study of the intertextual relations between Doris Lessing and the American writer Clancy Sigal which, inevitably, also includes Laing: Sigal was Laing's patient while also Lessing's lover.

³ Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* was published in 1961, one year after Laing's *The Divided Self*, and is introduced by the British anti-psychiatrist David Cooper. In *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France 1973-1974*, Foucault reads the anti-psychiatry movements as an attempt to enact a "demedicalization of madness" (2006, 346).

⁴ For more on the connections between madness and mothering in *The Four-Gated City* see my article “Madness and Mothering in Doris Lessing’s *The Four-Gated City* (1969)” (Myler 2013, 15-20).

⁵ In a letter to Roberta Rubenstein, Lessing claims that she had no knowledge of *The Politics of Experience* when she wrote *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and the use of the name Watkins was mere coincidence (see Rubenstein 1979, 196).

⁶ *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* was published in the same year as Lessing’s preface to *The Golden Notebook* which so vehemently attacked her critics’ tendency to read the book only or primarily in terms of the “sex war” debate.

⁷ My claim that Lessing might simultaneously deny any connection to the *The Politics of Experience* and yet be quite consciously parodying it, isn’t so implausible – Lessing, after all, is the writer who deliberately deceived her publishing house and readers when she published under the pseudonym Jane Somers in order to expose the industry’s reluctance to publish new writers.