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Everyday Advice on Everyday Love
Romantic Expertise in Mid-twentieth Century Britain

Claire Langhamer[1]

On 31st August 1945, the popular British magazine, "Woman's Own", announced a change in the identity of its resident agony aunt. The departure of Leonora Eyles heralded the arrival of Mary Grant. In the face of this change, the continuing importance of the 'problem page' format was robustly asserted:

> The European War is over, but, as might be expected, personal as well as national and international problems abound. We believe that our country's problems and those of the world can never be separated from those of the individual, that if we live full, happy and serene lives, we are better able to do our own vigorous share in the complex and interesting tasks of peace.[2]

A week later the new incumbent penned her first column. In a thoughtful introduction to her philosophy as an advisor, she expounded on the link between historical moment, emotion and good citizenship:

> In the last six years we have seen what lack of understanding, greed, and blind selfishness can do to humanity. If we could take the machinery of war – *any* war – to pieces and examine it, we would probably find that a kind of warped bitterness in one man's mind started it. Lack of understanding of ourselves and our emotional problems can have a more far-reaching effect than many of us dream – like a stone thrown in a pond, when the circles grow wider and wider, and one is powerless to stop them. So each one of us has some kind of effect on our immediate circle, which in turn may influence a much bigger part of the community. If only we can set our problems right before the circles ripple disturbingly out of reach.[3]

1 I would like to thank Lucy Robinson, Andy Wood, the special issue editors of "L'Homme. Z. F. G." and two anonymous referees for the most helpful comments on this essay. The extracts from Mass Observation are reproduced courtesy of the Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive.

2 Woman's Own (August 31, 1945), 6.

3 Woman's Own (September 7, 1945), 18 (italics in this and the two following quotations are in the original).

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"I believe," the agony aunt concluded, "that it is how people *feel* that ultimately decides how they live."[4] The proper management of feeling was, in this reading, a fundamental way of coping with the problems of post-war British society. Within this world, good citizens were emotionally literate individuals who took active responsibility for their own affective welfare. And yet this was not a task which they had to face alone. As "Woman's Own" opportunistically argued, "Women – *and* men – who are unwilling or unable to share their problems and heartaches with a friend, find it a great relief to write to a wise and kindly adviser whom they are never likely to meet. People want to discuss their problems with an impartial judge."[5]

In this essay I explore the dynamics of problem page emotion-dialogue by looking at the letters that mid-twentieth century magazine readers wrote about heterosexual love, and the advice that they were offered. I will focus in particular on the advice columns of one of Britain's most popular women's magazines, "Woman's Own", analysing a sample of problem pages drawn from the period 1940 to 1960.[6] Before moving on to this short case study, however, I will outline the historical and historiographical context within which the essay is situated.

1. Historical and Historiographical Context

Mid-century Britain, by which I mean the 1940s and 1950s, was a place of distinctive demographic trends and rapidly changing emotional culture. More and longer marriages, at ever younger ages, provided a historically specific context for affective lives.[7] The balance between pragmatism and love in the making of lifelong commitment had shifted decisively towards the latter, although marriage remained the primary vehicle for its long term expression.[8] Everyday understanding of the meaning of love was itself

4 Woman's Own (September 7, 1945), 18.

5 Woman's Own (August 31, 1945), 6.

6 An IPA National Readership Survey of 1959 showed that 25 % of British women read "Woman" and 22 % read "Woman's Own". Within the 16–24 age group the numbers were higher, at 33 % and 30 % respectively. Cf. Mark Abrams, Teenage Consumer Spending in 1959 (Part II) Middle Class and Working Class Boys and Girls, London 1961, 9. On "Woman's Own" see Janice Winship, Women's Magazines. Times of War and Management of the Self in Woman's Own, in: Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson eds., Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War, Manchester 1996, 127–139.

7 Cf. Pat Thane, Family Life and "Normality" in Postwar British Culture, in: Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann eds., Life after Death. Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s, Cambridge 2003, 193–210.

8 Cf. Judy Giles, "You Meet 'em and that's it". Working Class Women's Refusal of Romance Between the Wars in Britain, in: Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey eds., Romance Revisited, London 1995, 279–292; Natalie Higgins, The Changing Expectations and Realities of Marriage in the English Working Class, 1920–1960, unpublished PhD thesis, Cambridge 2002.

changing: romance and sex as well as the transformative aspects of love were increasingly placed in the foreground.[9] And yet, tensions between a need for self-discipline and desire for self-expression, anxieties about the impact of war and secularisation on moral standards, and concern about the future of the family coalesced into a discourse of emotional instability. While romantic love was increasingly positioned as a key resource in the making of subjectivities, it was not clear whether this was a stable basis upon which to build real lives. My suggestion here is that we map some of this complexity and attendant emotional anxiety with the use of problem page evidence.

The broader research context for this essay is, of course, that of the history of emotion: a vibrant and methodologically adventurous field that spans period and region.[10] The historical study of emotion is founded upon the assumption that feeling is framed by time and place.[11] The so-called 'emotional turn' has generated diverse approaches rooted in the various schools of historical practice within which scholars operate. Some approach emotion itself as – to borrow from Joan W. Scott – a "useful category of historical analysis".[12] Ute Frevert, for example, has recently published a highly suggestive history of the moral economy of emotions; in 2012 a themed issue of "Rethinking History" edited by Benno Gammerl sought to expand the scope of historical approaches to emotion by introducing the concept of "emotional styles".[13] Elsewhere, Thomas Dixon has usefully charted the intellectual history of the keyword at the heart of the emotional turn.[14]

9 Cf. Claire Langhamer, Love. Selfhood and Authenticity in Post War Britain, in: Cultural and Social History, 9, 2 (2012), 277–297.

10 See for example Barbara H. Rosenwein ed., Anger's Past. The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages, New York 1998; and her more recent book Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages, New York 2006; Linda A. Pollock, Anger and the Negotiation of Relationships in Early Modern England, in: The Historical Journal, 47, 3, 2004, 567–590; Joanna Bourke, Fear and Anxiety. Writing about Emotion in Modern History, in: History Workshop Journal, 55, 2003, 111–133. Recent works on the modern British context includes Michael Roper's methodological intervention Slipping Out of View. Subjectivity and Emotion in Gender History, in: History Workshop Journal, 59 (2005), 57–72. Work on other European countries includes William M. Reddy, The Navigation of Feeling. A Framework for the History of Emotions, Cambridge/New York 2001, which uses a case study of revolutionary France to illustrate his theory of 'emotives' and makes the claim that the study of emotions is central to our understanding of political life. For a comparative account of Western emotionology see Cas Wouters, Sex and Manners. Female Emancipation in the West, 1890–2000, London 2004.

11 For a recent survey of the field see Susan J. Matt, Current Emotion Research in History. Or Doing History from the Inside Out, in: Emotion Review, 3, 1 (2011), 117–124.

12 Joan W. Scott, Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis, in: The American Historical Review, 91, 5, (1986), 1053–1075.

13 Ute Frevert, Emotions in History – Lost and Found, Budapest/New York 2011; Rethinking History. The Journal of Theory and Practice, 16, 2 (2012), special issue: Emotional Styles – Concepts and Challenges, ed. by Benno Gammerl.

14 Thomas Dixon, "Emotion". The History of a Keyword in Crisis, in: Emotion Review, 4, 4, (2012), 338–344.

Others continue to explore individual emotions such as anger, fear and anxiety.[15] Romantic love has attracted the attention of historians of different time periods and locations.[16] Within the British context, work by Stephen Brooke, Marcus Collins, Martin Francis, and Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher has illuminated the political, cultural, social and economic dimensions of love.[17] Important work by Luisa Passerini and Simon May maps its intellectual history.[18] My own social history of twentieth century love – which argues that an emotional revolution occurred in mid-century England – is to be published in the summer of 2013.[19]

Attention to emotion-specific or more general standards and codes still characterises the work of a significant body of researchers, an approach for which the early work of Peter and Carol Stearns provided a point of departure.[20] More recently, cultural approaches have been challenged by those keen to explore the lived experience and everyday use of emotion by drawing attention to "the significance of the material, of bodily experiences, and of the practices of daily life in which emotional relations are embedded."[21] For historians utilising these approaches, the identification of sources that allow us to move beyond a top-down reading of emotionology is crucial. Life history texts, for example, have facilitated access to the ways in which individual men and women in the past constructed and narrated their emotional lives. They can also illuminate the complex and contradictory ways in which people employ particular emotions, interact with dominant emotional codes, and move between what Barbara Rosenwein has described as specific "emotional communities", or what Benno Gammerl conceptualises as spatially defined "emotional styles".[22]

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15 See for example Rosenwein, Anger, see note 10; Joanna Bourke, Fear. A Cultural History, London 2006.

16 For nineteenth century middle-class America see Karen Lystra, Searching the Heart. Women, Men and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America, Oxford 1989. On the Soviet Union see Deborah A. Field, Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev's Russia, London 2007. On the GDR see Josie McLellan, Love in the Time of Communism. Intimacy and Sexuality in the GDR, Cambridge 2011.

17 Stephen Brooke, Sexual Politics. Sexuality, Family Planning and the British Left, from the 1880s to the Present Day, Oxford 2011; Marcus Collins, Modern Love. An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth-Century Britain, London 2003; Martin Francis, The Flyer. British Culture and the Royal Air Force 1939–1945, Oxford 2008; Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, Sex Before the Sexual Revolution. Intimate Life in England 1918–1963, Cambridge 2010.

18 Luisa Passerini, Europe in Love. Love in Europe. Imagination and Politics in Britain between the Wars, London 1999; Simon May, Love. A History, New Haven, CT/London 2011, see review in this issue.

19 Claire Langhamer, The English in Love. The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution, Oxford 2013.

20 Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, Emotionology. Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards, in: The American Historical Review, 90, 4 (1985), 813–836.

21 Roper, View, see note 10, 69.

22 Rosenwein, Communities, see note 10; Gammerl, Emotional Styles – Concepts and Challenges, in: idem ed., Styles, see note 13, 161–175, 164.

Another way of accessing the complex relationship between codes and practice is to read prescriptive literature somewhat against the grain, paying particular attention to the mechanisms through which such advice circulated and the manner in which it was received. As Ute Frevert observes, "Emotional norms, just as any social norm, were always in flux inviting individual agency as well as collective bargaining."[23] The focus in this essay is upon what we might call 'everyday' forms of advice. In what follows, I use a case study of relationships between agony aunts and their readers to map broader shifts in emotional culture and authority. I approach advice columns as areas of cultural contestation; spaces where 'authentic' personal feeling was in conflict with prescribed standards; where the authority of family could conflict with that of the expert; where the therapeutic state and voluntary organisations might be set up as a counterpoint to everyday community norms.

The personal problems which lay at the heart of advice columns reveal the contours of publically acceptable thought and practice at any given moment, even though they were sometimes edited and more rarely fabricated.[24] The agony aunt herself or – less frequently in this period – himself was not an unproblematic purveyor of dominant emotional codes. To be sure, historically contingent norms underpinned the advice offered, but that advice had to be palatable if a column was to maintain its audience. In effect, it was the agony aunt's job to mediate between the subjective and the prescriptive. The advice columnist worked within the blurred space where codes became practicable. Although the tone of advice could be fairly didactic, complex negotiation rather than straightforward imposition characterised the emotion-exchange within these magazines. Agony aunts offered clear, yet practical advice, adapting moral frameworks to individual experience. Fundamentally, they acknowledged both dominant discourse and the messiness of actual emotional lives. The use of problem pages as historical evidence therefore allows us to think through some of the key questions within the history of emotion and indeed within social history more broadly. How are dominant norms applied to everyday lives and effectively made 'real'? What happens to these norms when experience fails to coincide with them? Advice columns allow us to consider the interplay between individual self-knowledge and expert advice in framing subjectivities and relationships.

The essay focuses on the 1940s and 1950s as a key moment of emotional turmoil in Britain – a time when, as I have already suggested, the meaning and significance of love was especially unstable. I will argue that romantic love lay at the heart of the twentieth-century battle between prescription and practice, ideas and experience and, crucially, between duty and self-expression. It also constituted a site upon which claims to agency could be asserted. This is not to disregard feminist analyses that have rightly emphasised

23 Frevert, Emotions, see note 13, 215.

24 On the use of problem pages as historical sources see Penny Morris, From Private to Public. Alba de Céspedes' Agony Column in 1950s Italy, in: Modern Italy, 9, 1(2004), 11–20.

the capacity of heterosexual love to enslave women. Shulamith Firestone – writing in 1970 – asserted that "love, perhaps even more than childbearing, is the pivot of women's oppression today".[25] More recently, feminists have critiqued the upbeat "democratisation of intimacy" thesis advanced by sociologist Anthony Giddens.[26] According to this thesis, modern love is founded upon freedom of choice and sexual desire. But as Wendy Langford puts it, "The 'democratisation of intimacy' promises liberty, equality and togetherness. In fact it is the process by which restriction, inequality and disaffection are merely obscured, facilitating the most insidious domination of all: domination by love."[27]

Claims to emotional authenticity could, nonetheless, be used as tools for subversion, resistance and personal transformation, particularly when feelings, experience and cultural expectations were out of step with each other. Within this period, experience increasingly operated as a source of knowledge, as ordinary people put their trust in feeling as a basis for action and understanding. The problem pages that constituted an intrinsic part of the modern women's magazine format, allow access to efforts to deal with the relationship between feeling and behaviour, enabling us to consider the power of the claim of really being in love at a time when modern mass culture offered a continually expanding resource out of which individuals could fashion a romantic sense of themselves.[28]

2. The Rise of the Everyday Expert

A growing interest in ordinary people's intimate lives constitutes an important context for the significance of agony aunts in mid-century Britain. What Adrian Bingham describes as an "insatiable demand for information about the habits and opinions of the public" provided a stimulus for all manner of mid-century investigation.[29] For

25 Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex, London 1979, 121.

26 Anthony Giddens, The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies, Cambridge 1992. A number of other sociologists have investigated the impact of this trend upon our intimate lives. See for example Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gersheim, The Normal Chaos of Love, Cambridge 1995; Jeffrey Weeks, The World We Have Won. The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life, London 2007. For a pessimistic view of intimacy in the "modern liquid world" see Zygmunt Bauman, Liquid Love. On the Fragility of Human Bonds, Cambridge 2003. Feminist sociologists have, not unreasonably, suggested that in a society where women still shoulder the majority of responsibility for child rearing, the pursuit of happiness is not always an issue for the individual alone. See for example Mary Evans, Love. An Unromantic Discussion, Cambridge 2003; Wendy Langford, Revolutions of the Heart. Gender, Power and the Delusions of Love, London 1999; Carol Smart, Personal Life, Cambridge 2007.

27 Langford, Revolutions, see note 26, 21.

28 Cf. Matt Houlbrook, "A Pin to See the Peepshow". Culture, Fiction, and Selfhood in Edith Thompson's Letters, 1921–1922, in: Past and Present, 207, 1 (2010), 215–249.

29 Adrian Bingham, Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life and the British Popular Press 1918–1978, Oxford 2009, 97.

opinion pollsters and documentary filmmakers, journalists as well as social scientists, the 'ordinary' person was a source of endless fascination – as well as a means of making a living.[30] The maverick anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer, for example, generated over 10.000 detailed questionnaire responses through a partnership with the "People" newspaper, publishing his analysis as "Exploring English Character" in 1955.[31] Studies emanating not just from the universities but from the spheres of politics, law, medicine and church supply a range of survey evidence for the examination of emotional and sexual intimacy in mid-century Britain. Their authors regularly made their own views on the impact of modernity on everyday life clear.

The sociologist Pearl Jephcott conducted a series of projects on young working-class women and, although sympathetic to their concerns, was consistently critical of their leisure and life choices. She concluded that teenage girls were in need of expert advice on all manner of things, not least sex, courtship and marriage. She particularly recommended training in love. "They have to be made aware of the magnitude and of the scale on which 'love' may operate. For that, they must begin to make contact with the real as opposed to the Hollywood exponents, which means that they must become acquainted with what 'great' people, the poets, the scientists, the painters and the saints have to teach."[32] Jephcott's anxiety that young people's emotional worlds were changing, and not always for the better, could be allayed only by the intervention of high culture and the well-trained expert. In the absence of these, young women would be prey to the romantic scripts offered by commercial leisure which provided nothing but bad advice and fakery. The Mother's Union shared Jephcott's concerns: "[T]he devil, who was once credited with all the best tunes, has now appropriated the glossiest, best-produced weeklies, the liveliest and smartest radio and television programmes, and the most popular newspapers. And the one subject they all blare, croon, shriek, purr and smirk about is what they call 'love'."[33]

Growing interest in the thoughts and feelings of the ordinary person – whether as citizen, worker, housewife or BBC listener – was accompanied by an enhanced reverence for the trained expert. The expert was not a mid-twentieth century invention; but the post-war "meritocratic moment" placed a premium on ability and expertise.[34] In the atomic age, scientific expertise both terrified and enthralled. It was a boundary

30 On the development of social scientific methods of accessing ordinary life see Mike Savage, Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940, Oxford 2010.

31 Geoffrey Gorer, Exploring English Character. A Study of the Morals and Behaviour of the English People, New York 1955.

32 Pearl Jephcott, Rising Twenty. Notes on Some Ordinary Girls, London 1948, 94.

33 Mother's Union News, March 1961, 6, quot. following Cordelia Moyse, A History of the Mothers' Union. Women, Anglicanism and Globalisation, 1876–2008, Woodbridge 2009, 196.

34 Harold Perkin, The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880, London 1989, 405; cf. Guy Ortolano, The Two Cultures Controversy. Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain, Cambridge 2008.

marker. One of the contributors to the British social investigation movement, Mass Observation, described "the yawning chasm between the mind of the scientist and the ordinary person [...]. I have the same feeling when I contemplate them and their works, as I have when I look upon the immensity of the heavens, and lose myself gazing at the stars. One is lost and sometimes afraid."[35]

In the immediate aftermath of war, "the authority of experts had become central not only to industry, economic management and social policy but also to the areas of cultural taste, the urban and rural environments, consumer behaviour and the psychological well-being of communities."[36] Within this world, education – both formal and informal – was seen as vital. First of all, it transformed the merely talented into the expert; secondly, it was the means with which expertise could be brought to bear on society. In conjunction with the affluence which lasted until the OPEC crisis of 1973 and the commitment to welfare security embedded in the social-democratic consensus, a rising tide of expertise promised a managed future of problem solving and progress. In practice, old forms of cultural and political authority were not always supplanted. "I didn't pay much attention to what they said at the clinic," a Mrs Banks told social researchers Michael Young and Peter Willmott in the mid-1950s. "I stopped taking the baby when he caught cold after the undressing up there. I go by what Mum tells me. It's too fussy and fandangled up there. I'd rather take old-fashioned advice by experience."[37]

The emotional intimacies of ordinary people were, nonetheless, an area where, it was believed, expert talents might fruitfully be employed. According to the National Marriage Guidance Council, it was "the expert's job to disentangle emotions which are not working normally; and it is foolish not to seek expert help in these matters."[38] One of its leading lights, David R. Mace, claimed to have written his 1948 contribution, "Marriage in Crisis", for

> [...] ordinary folks, and I'm going to write it the way ordinary folks will understand. If some of my friends think this is undignified, I can't help it. I did once write a book of the other sort and I thought that what I had to say was quite important. But not many people bought it, so it cut no ice with the folks I meant it for because they never read it. Probably it looked stodgy and dull, and they preferred the newspaper.[39]

35 Mass Observation Archive, File Report no. 3073, "Middle-class: why?", 1948, 88.

36 Becky Conekin, Frank Mort and Chris Waters eds., Moments of Modernity. Reconstructing Britain 1945–1964, London 1999, 15.

37 Michael Young and Peter Willmott, Family and Kinship in East London, London 1957, 54.

38 National Marriage Guidance Council, Sex Difficulties in the Wife, London 1953, 9.

39 David R. Mace, Marriage Crisis. London 1948, 8f.

The ever-expanding print media provided a particularly effective channel for the views of everyday experts to be advanced: Mace, for example, ran his own advice column in the pages of "The Star" newspaper in the late 1940s.[40]

The women's magazine of the mid-twentieth century specialised in the provision of practical advice for the busy reader. Upon its launch in 1932, "Woman's Own" boasted that it offered "seven friends of experience waiting to help you each week."[41] Advice on motherhood, for example, was offered by the rather austere looking Nurse Vincent in "Our Baby Circle".[42] The introduction of new features emphasised both the utility of what was being offered and the qualitative dimensions of the reader-columnist relationship. Introduced in 1934, "Hilary Helps with Your Housework" was a "new friend" offering a "fund of hints".[43] She also offered prizes of 10 shillings and 6 pence to those readers who were willing to reveal their own favourite household tips.[44] And yet the magazine audience also wanted to be entertained: gossip columns, short story fiction and fashion news were popular magazine staples.

The agony aunt played a precisely defined role within this format, simultaneously offering serious emotional advice and voyeuristic entertainment. "Woman's Own's" first agony aunt – "the woman who understands" – was the best-selling novelist, journalist and socialist, Leonora Eyles.[45] She wrote under the all-encompassing title "Life and You". Eyles did not conceal from her readers her own complex life experiences, which included childhood poverty, migration to Australia, single motherhood and divorce: "one gets a store of information as one lives and mine is there to be shared."[46] During the war, Eyles also briefly offered advice on "wartime housekeeping, domestic problems and sex problems" to the readers of the socialist weekly "The Tribune", suggesting in her first column that "very often it is almost impossible to get an unbiased opinion on a problem from one's friends – they are too deeply involved in one's troubles to be impartial".[47] Eyles was also the author of a number of extremely popular advice manuals including "Common Sense about Sex" (1933), "Sex for the Engaged" (1952) and the marvellous "Unmarried but Happy" (1947). When she retired from "Woman's Own" in 1945 she was, as we have seen, succeeded by "Mary Grant". Mary Grant was a pseudonym; the writer was in fact Angela Willians.

40 For his own thoughts on this column see David Mace, An English Advice Column, in: Marriage and Family Living, 12, 3 (1950), 100–102.

41 Woman's Own (October 22, 1932), 54.

42 Woman's Own (October 6, 1934), 792.

43 Woman's Own (October 6, 1934), 786.

44 Cf. Woman's Own (October 6, 1934), 786.

45 For more on Leonora Eyles see Maroula Joannou, "Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows". Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change 1918–38, Oxford 1995.

46 The Tribune (April 18, 1941), 22.

47 The Tribune (April 11, 1941), 8.

The other most widely read women's magazine of the mid-century – "Woman" – initially resisted the problem page formula, but poor sales quickly encouraged it to fall into line. A refugee psychologist from Germany was appointed as its resident agony aunt under the pseudonym "Evelyn Home."[48] Peggy Makins, who became the second Evelyn Home when "Mrs Psychologist" departed for America, explained the choice of name. "The 'Evelyn' contained Eve, the archetypal mother, the temptress, the sexy side of woman; the 'Home' was what every woman is supposed to want."[49] "Woman's Weekly" went with the even less subtle "Mrs Marryat" column, which claimed, "We do not lay down the law here; we just talk things over in friendly sympathy."[50] On the whole, personal problems were deemed to be best answered by women journalists, although the occasional man did contribute to the genre. Nigel Mansfield, for example, was "Glamour" magazine's resident "Love Expert".

Problem pages were phenomenally popular with readers, both as entertainment and sources of informal advice. A study of letters sent to weekly periodicals between 1953 and 1955 estimated that half a million letters were handled by advice columns each year and asserted that the majority were clearly "genuine".[51] Ann Temple of the "Daily Mail" was effusive on the quality of the letters she received: "I never cease to marvel at the descriptive gifts of my correspondents. They achieve their effects in diverse ways, some by the lavish use of images, some by emphasis and reiteration, some by sparse, epigrammatic comments. Some march slowly, some meander, some go helter-skelter, some say all in a few lines. All are eloquent."[52] David Mace started out believing that only the "insane", "unbalanced" or those with an axe to grind would write to him via the "Star", but "to my astonishment [...] the people who write to me through my column appear to be more intelligent than those who go to agencies."[53] Magazine and newspaper problem pages therefore facilitate understanding of the dynamic relationship between everyday emotional experience and standards and norms, albeit within the limits imposed by the editorial power of veto.

Although ubiquitous, the status of expert advice within affairs of the heart was nonetheless equivocal. The emergence of new modes of selfhood which ostensibly prioritised personality and interiority appeared to enhance their authority.[54] Properly trained experts were well positioned to guide the individual through the difficult complexities of their own psychology. And yet, these self-consciously modern understandings of the

48 Cf. Peggy Makins, The Evelyn Home Story, Glasgow 1975, 13f.
49 Makins, Home, see note 48, 11.
50 Woman's Weekly (August 9, 1952), 288.
51 James Hemming, Problems of Adolescent Girls, London 1960, 17f.
52 Ann Temple, Good or Bad – It's Life, London 1944, 16.
53 Mace, Advice, see note 40, 102.
54 Cf. Mathew Thomson, Psychological Subjects. Identity, Culture and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain, Oxford 2006.

self also challenged the diagnostic capacities of the expert. An emotional revolution of sorts brought with it growing confidence in self-diagnosis rooted in everyday experience. As Mass Observation put it in 1949,

> [p]erhaps what stands out most clearly is the fact that in the field of sex, as in many others, modern man is confused [...] the 'leaders' are talking one language, the 'led' another. Is the 'common man' to believe the law which tells him that homosexuality is a punishable offence, or the two Lesbians next door who harm nobody, and are, in other respects, apparently 'moral'. Is he to believe the church which preaches that all fornication is sin, or his own life in which he had intercourse before marriage without apparently suffering. Is he to believe pamphlets that tell him that masturbation will do him incalculable physical harm, or to trust his own experience?[55]

Perhaps even more so than sex, romantic love was a topic which precipitated questions that the experts could not always answer with authority. It was not just that prescription did not always match practice; rather, romantic love was a resource in the assertion of agency and a potentially powerful driver of change. The destabilising power of love rested, at least in part, on its resistance to expert intervention even as it became an ever more ubiquitous aspect of popular culture and commerce. As we will see, while agony aunts advised, at least in part, on the basis of their own claims to authenticity, their authority was always in danger of being undercut by the authenticity of everyday emotional experience.

3. Authenticity, Transgression and Authority in Problem Page Dialogue

In a recent overview of newspaper problem pages and British sexual culture since 1918, Adrian Bingham suggests that "the mid-1930s to the 1970s can be seen as the 'golden age' of the newspaper problem column."[56] He identifies three distinct moments in problem page history. The first, the 1930s and 1940s, was, he suggests, a period when problem pages "almost invariably provided staunch defences of conventional morality and portrayed sexuality as a dangerous instinct that needed to be restrained and managed."[57] The second, the 1950s and 1960s, was a time when more challenging material was published and where sexuality was increasingly validated. The final post-1970 phase placed an onus on entertainment and pleasure in the discussion of sexuality.

55 Mass Observation Archive, File Report no. 3110A, "Little Kinsey", 19.

56 Adrian Bingham, Newspaper Problem Pages and British Sexual Culture since 1918, in: Media History, 18, 1 (2012), 51–63, 52.

57 Bingham, Newspaper, see note 56, 51.

Here I want to work across two of Bingham's moments by dealing with the 1940s and 1950s together. I am less concerned with change over time in the advice offered by agony aunts and more with the ways in which the letters published and responses to them illuminate key aspects of romantic love in this period. Agony aunts were called upon to bring their advisory talents to bear on two issues in particular: first, the identification and verification of love, and second, the problem of a love that transgressed acceptable social boundaries. The responses that they crafted often appear to support dominant narratives, and yet close attention to these dialogues points us towards the contradictions and illogicalities which were, ultimately, to herald new approaches to emotional intimacy.

A persistent strand running through mid-century advice columns concerned the difficulties of authenticating love. "I don't know if I am in love!" confided an 18-year-old woman in 1947, explaining that she felt "strangely disturbed" by her young man's presence. "I think constantly of him [...]. How can I know if this is love and what can I do?"[58] "Will you please help me?" another young woman asked Mary Grant in 1952. "I have been going out with a boy for nearly a year. The trouble is that I don't know if I love him or not. Sometimes I think there is nobody like him, but other times I don't seem to care whether I see him at all. If I married him, do you think I could grow to love him? I know he would be very good to me."[59] The suspicion that a good marriage partner might not necessarily be one with whom one was in love spoke to the more pragmatic calculations that working class girls in particular had long been encouraged to make when selecting marriage partners. In her response, Mary Grant counselled pragmatism of a different sort: "It is never wise for a girl to marry in the hope that she may grow to love her husband: it does sometimes happen, it is true, but the risk is too great to take, particularly if she is young and possibly still in the 'changing' stage emotionally."[60] The girl was advised to see the boy less often.

Another example from 1952 makes the shifting relationship between pragmatism and romance even more apparent. "I am in my late twenties and for quite a while now have been going about with two men who say they love me and want to marry me. Both are secure in the business world and have good incomes. I do not love either of them but am reasonably fond of them and feel that I ought to marry one so that I can be sure of security in my later years. What is your opinion?"[61] Grant's response was firm: "One cannot reduce marriage to a purely materialistic basis; complete financial security is desirable but if that is all one has then it is practically impossible to be happy and to lead a satisfactory life."[62] In replying to another letter, Grant asserted this view

58 Woman's Own (July 25, 1947), 22.
59 Woman's Own (January 17, 1952), 33.
60 Woman's Own (January 17, 1952), 33.
61 Woman's Own (March 27, 1952), 33.
62 Woman's Own (March 27, 1952), 33.

with the utmost clarity: "To marry as a matter of duty and not desire is, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, to condemn oneself and the other person to a life of frustration and misery."[63]

If love was integral to marriage decisions, then physical attraction was also an increasingly important aspect of love. But exactly how this should be demonstrated was another area of everyday anxiety for the readers of "Woman's Own". Mary Grant was continually called upon to translate fictional models of passionate romance into the everyday language and experiences of ordinary life. For example, a woman who had been courting for two years was unsure about her feelings for her boyfriend: "When he makes love to me, I don't feel as if I were in the clouds, like they describe in books, yet I am sure he would make a very good husband."[64] Grant strove to reassure her, stating that "[a] feeling of quiet content is more usual than one of wild ecstasy when two people are in love; and it lasts longer!"[65] On the whole, however, as Adrian Bingham's periodisation suggests, agony aunts urged caution when it came to physical relations prior to marriage. Whilst sexual fulfilment was increasingly positioned as an essential aspect of married love, before marriage it was viewed as a potential danger to love. "My boyfriend and I are very much in love, and I am afraid that we are inclined to carry our love-making too far," wrote one concerned woman, who continued "I worry very much in case one day we shall do something really wrong. I am too young to think of marriage yet, and I am afraid that if this state of affairs goes on much longer he will leave me." [66] Mary Grant was reassuring but firm:

> This is a problem which faces all young people who are very much in love and you will just have to make up your minds that until you can marry no intimate love-making and caresses can be allowed; try to dwell more on the practical than on the emotional side of your future together, and each of you take up some hobby (domestic science, cookery, carpentry) that will be useful later on. If your boyfriend really loves you he will not leave you.[67]

In contrast, once married, the absence of a satisfying sexual relationship was cause for critical comment. "Love can be expressed in many ways, but usually in marriage, sex has to step in if people are to be happy and normal," was Grant's response to a woman whose husband professed love but had not consummated their marriage.[68]

63 Woman's Own (March 9, 1950), 45.
64 Woman's Own (January 26, 1950), 34.
65 Woman's Own (January 26, 1950), 34.
66 Woman's Own (January 12, 1950), 34.
67 Woman's Own (January 12, 1950), 34.
68 Woman's Own (April 10, 1942), 22.

For those who did err before or after marriage, honesty was not always the prescribed policy, particularly during wartime when the maintenance of military morale was held to be intrinsically linked to women's sexual continence. "Generally speaking I think that if a girl has a past, it is her own affair ..." was the view of Leonora Eyles during wartime, a position she defended in the most extreme circumstances.[69] For example, a woman who had married "the best husband in the world" at 18 years of age wrote of her affair with another man whilst her husband was away in the army.[70] She conceived a child as a result of the relationship, but her husband assumed the child to be his. Eyles was clear that the truth should not be revealed "I daresay your conscience prompts you to tell your husband, but that would do nobody any good; he would lose wife and home, the baby would lose a good father, and you'd be ruined. Bury the past and try to forget; that is all you can do if you want to make amends."[71]

A second major strand of anxiety within mid-century problem pages therefore concerned love affairs amongst married people. Agony aunt views on the matter were consistently unyielding. For example, a woman who admitted that her longing for a man who was not her husband made her "so sick with misery and longing for him that I sometimes feel suicidal",[72] was advised that she was "in love with a dream". "Do try to pull yourself together, stop brooding, and make up your mind to make a success of your marriage," Leonora Eyles rather bluntly suggested.[73] "I am married, but parted from my husband five years ago. I never see him now and he means nothing to me," wrote another "Woman's Own" reader.[74]

> For the past two years I have been going about with a man who is married and living with his wife; he has a son whom he loves dearly. We are really in love – there is nobody else for either of us – but he has no grounds upon which he could divorce his wife. My little girl is awfully fond of him, and I know we could be the happiest family in the world if the four of us could be together. We meet four or five times a week; but what future is there for us? Do give me your advice.[75]

Grant's advice was predictable within a society where divorce remained difficult to access. "These things are heart breaking, I know, but in this world we cannot just take what we want, irrespective of other people's feelings. There is only one thing for you to do: bring the association to an end at once. It is the hard thing, but there is no doubt

69 Woman's Own (January 16, 1942), 22.
70 Woman's Own (February 6, 1942), 22.
71 Woman's Own (February 6, 1942), 22.
72 Woman's Own (May 22, 1942), 22.
73 Woman's Own (May 22, 1942), 22.
74 Woman's Own (May 11, 1950), 37.
75 Woman's Own (May 11, 1950), 37.

whatever that it is the right one."[76] This advice was repeated endlessly to the almost weekly letters on a similar theme. And yet individuals continued to write, asserting the authenticity of their socially transgressive love affairs. "Do you think it is possible for a woman to love two men?" asked a woman in 1952.[77] Claims to authentic love continued to provide the grounds for a powerful form of agency as readers resisted, or simply ignored, the presumably anticipated agony aunt response. "I am 49 and have been in love with another woman's husband for over a year," another wrote. "My husband and my friend's wife found out, but forgave us. Every time we meet, we feel worse than the time before, yet we do not want to break up our homes."[78] The couple were, of course, urged to cease their meetings "and hope that forgetfulness will follow."[79]

The limits of agony aunt authority in relation to romantic love are apparent across the two decades considered here. On one level, everyday experts such as Mary Grant asserted their own influence over their reader's emotional worlds by supplanting other authority figures – not least 'old fashioned' parents. When Mary Grant ran the column "Is Mother Right?" she drew attention to the fact that parental authority was not unchallengeable.[80] On receiving a letter from an unhappy woman married to a drunk, Eyles surmised that "I feel it is your mother who is to blame for forcing you into marriage with a man who did not want you", and suggested she get a legal separation.[81] A young girl under pressure to marry her parents' preferred suitor rather than the older Polish man with whom she was in love was advised that:

> This is a question that nobody but yourself can possibly decide, my dear; if you really love the Pole, love him enough to go to a strange country and give up your own nationality, then you should marry him. But are you certain it is not the fascination of a foreign accent and a different outlook that attract you? Naturally your parents would prefer you to marry a man who would not take you far away, but I am quite sure they do not expect you to marry a man you do not love.[82]

And yet the authority of everyday experts over the emotional affairs of their readers was also rather tenuous. When a reader admitted that she was unsure which of two young men she was really in love with, Grant admitted that her own expertise had its limits. "Love is normally such an overwhelming emotion that if you felt it you wouldn't have to ask anybody's advice about what to do!"[83] Another woman unsure about whether to

76 Woman's Own (May 11, 1950), 37.
77 Woman's Own (February 7, 1952), 37.
78 Woman's Own (September 1, 1955), 57.
79 Woman's Own (September 1, 1955), 57.
80 Woman's Own (July 11, 1947), 22.
81 Woman's Own (May 27, 1942), 22.
82 Woman's Own (March 22, 1946), 18.
83 Woman's Own (Dec 26, 1947), 22.

marry a divorced man against her parent's wishes was told that "this is a question of conscience, and nobody but you can decide what you should do."[84] Indeed the question of emotional authority haunted the emotion-discourse evident on these pages. Did the everyday experts, able to draw on their experience of problem solving, know best, or did the individual experiencing authentic emotion hold sway?

Perhaps most interesting in this regard is those instances where the agony aunt's position was explicitly criticised by her readers. Sometimes in cases such as these, the critical letter received a damning rebuff designed to ward off any unpicking of dominant emotional codes. At the height of war, for example, one "Woman's Own" reader objected to the frequent exhortations made to wives to forgive their erring husbands. "I want to protest to you because you say that a wife whose husband has had an affair with a girl ought to forgive him and try to understand. I don't forgive my husband and I hate the girl even more than I hate Hitler; I consider it very wrong for you to talk like this," she explained.[85] Leonora Eyles was uncompromising in her response – as also in her defence of a sexual double standard: "Men are not made like women; a man can have such an affair even though he loves his wife, and is very much ashamed of it afterwards. You are wretched in this morass of hate; try my way for a little while and see what it does for you both."[86]

Elsewhere, however, a more conciliatory response spoke to an attempt to make idealised norms practicable. "I usually think your answers are very good, but why do you seem to consider 'the other woman' always the intruder?" asked another wartime reader.[87] "If a man and wife are stretched, surely they should not go on just because they are married? It seems to me that in such a case the wife may be the intruder."[88] Whilst Eyles's response cannot be characterised as libertarian, her attention to individual circumstance and her acknowledgement of the costs of matrimonial failure suggests an attempt to mould dominant norms around everyday experience:

> I don't believe in people sticking together just because they are married, my dear; but marriage nearly always involves other people – children, for instance – and sometimes an unhappy marriage can be re-organized and made happy. If a man wants to leave his wife just because of a sex attraction for another woman, that is not good enough you know. Each case must be judged on its own merits. Besides, if, as it should be, marriage is undertaken very seriously and with a real intention of making a successful life-long partnership it should not lightly be made to give place to a subsequent attraction, however strong. Marriage *is* a big step you know.[89]

84 Woman's Own (June 1, 1950), 45.
85 Woman's Own (May 22, 1942), 22.
86 Woman's Own (May 22, 1942), 22.
87 Woman's Own (October 1, 1943), 22.
88 Woman's Own (October 1, 1943), 22.
89 Woman's Own (October 1, 1943), 22 (italics in the original).

4. Negotiating Everyday Love

Writing in April 1949, a young "Woman's Own" reader posed the question "Am I really in Love?"[90]

> I have answered more than one "Are you in love?" quiz and, judging by this, I definitely am. But what worries me is that I never become more or less lifted out of this world when he kisses me; although I quite enjoy it. I'm not temporarily in a trance as happens in love stories. Is this quite natural?[91]

In her response Mary Grant attempted to reassure the girl. She was, according to Grant, probably in love, but needed help in tailoring her expectations to everyday life:

> Love of the kind you mean undoubtedly exists, but those who experience it live at such a pitch of emotion that they spend the major part of their lives being wretchedly unhappy. To ordinary people like you and me, love is a much deeper, more gentle, much more sincere and enduring passion. It is a self-sacrificing companionship and an ever-enduring association. It is washing up for the man you love when you are dead tired and could cry over the ruin of your pretty fingers, it is pretending that you want to wear last year's dance frock when you know your husband is worried because he can't buy you another, it is working cheerfully all day after having been up all night with a screaming baby. You two are probably in love with each other – I feel almost sure that you are; but bring your love down to earth – where love does the most good.[92]

Mid-century British agony aunts believed in the primacy of romantic and erotic love in the making of emotional lives and commitment – at least until the marriage day. Love, not pragmatism, formed the basis of a proper marriage; sexual attraction was an intrinsic part of the spousal relationship, although its full expression should come after, never before, the wedding vows were exchanged. And yet these everyday advisors also sought to translate romantic fantasies into something more practicable; something that had meaning to "ordinary people like you and me."[93] "In working out the solutions," wrote Ann Temple, "I soon discovered that the best test was to ask myself, 'Is there something here that really helps?'"[94] Everyday love was endowed with real power within

90 Woman's Own (April 1, 1949), 22.
91 Woman's Own (April 1, 1949), 22.
92 Woman's Own (April 1, 1949), 22.
93 Woman's Own (April 1, 1949), 22.
94 Temple, Life, see note 52, 6.

these emotion-dialogues, provided individuals were helped to bring their love "down to earth – where love does the most good."[95]

In this way the agony aunt mediated between dominant romantic norms, social structures and everyday practice. She did so through a mass media which was, as Adrian Bingham has argued, actively breaking down the boundaries between private and public lives in the mid-twentieth century.[96] She also, occasionally, provided a challenge to the authority of others. The power of parents, neighbours, friends – even church and state – could be diminished in the face of her advice. And yet, the authority wielded by agony aunts did not go uncontested. In part this was because mid-century concepts of love and marriage were inherently contradictory. If love really was so central to the making of the modern self, why should its expression be contained within heterosexuality and marriage? Indeed, although romantic love could be a cause of anxiety for mid-century women, it could also constitute the basis for claims to emotional agency which had the potential to destabilise social relations. This does, perhaps, help to explain the persistent presence of stories about socially transgressive relationships within the magazine pages in the 1940s and 1950s and the regularity with which claims to authentic love lay at the heart of these stories.

It is easy to dismiss magazine problem pages as straightforward exercises in emotional prescription and vehicles for the assertion of authority. The columns display problems which are apparently solved by the application of expertise. Norms are largely upheld and the advice offered is underpinned by historically situated notions of normalcy. And yet, when read against the grain, these columns offer a more complex and contested view of British emotion-dialogue. Advice was not always accepted with unambiguous enthusiasm. Sometimes it was explicitly refuted, at other times it met with a lower level of scepticism. Whilst these columns ostensibly presented a community of advice seekers in need of expert guidance, individual letters showcased feelings and experiences which often defied prescribed solutions. Nowhere is this negotiation and contestation more vividly demonstrated than in discussions of romantic love.

95 Woman's Own (April 1, 1949), 22.

96 Cf. Bingham, Family, see note 29, 97.