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Domestic Efficiency: Arnold Bennett and Home Management

I

For someone who declared that ‘Domesticity is inescapable’, it might be expected that homes, and home life, would lie at the heart of Arnold Bennett’s writing and his social thought. He is well-recognised as a close observer of interior scenes, yet the significance of Bennett’s immersion in discourses of domesticity has not been properly examined.¹ The home had been one battleground of debates over liberal values in the final decades of the nineteenth century: from hygiene awareness and household management to furniture design and new appliances, many domestic reformers sought to instil progressive approaches in the private sphere.² Bennett’s fictional and non-fictional writing on household management display an advocacy of modernisation while also suggesting scepticism over its possible successes. In his distinctive emphasis on efficiency – to link the private sphere of the home to the public sphere of business – Bennett’s work represents a key transition in the shift from the Victorian to the modern home that would emerge after the First World War.

Despite acceptance that ‘when it comes to describing interiors Bennett has few equals’, very little attention has been given to exploring the connections between Bennett’s

¹ Arnold Bennett, ‘The Domestic Novel Will Never Die’ (14 March 1929) in *Arnold Bennett: The Evening Standard Years. Books and Persons, 1926-1931*, ed. Andrew Mylett (London: Chatto and Windus), p.249.

² See Judith A. Nieswander, *The Cosmopolitan Interior: Liberalism and the British home 1870-1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

various non-fictional writings on household issues and his creative work.³ This article shows that Bennett did more than 'describe' interiors. He was, in fact, embedded within larger debates about home management that paved the way for the ideas that shaped distinctively modern homes: smaller in physical size and occupancy, with many fewer domestic staff, and above all, more rationally organised. From his editorship of *Woman* in the 1890s, to the many articles and tomes of home advice written throughout his career – but routinely dismissed by literary criticism – Bennett's non-fictional writing on domestic organisation helped to form his own brand of social-liberal politics centred on progressive rationalism and, particularly, the concept of efficiency. Advocacy of rational and carefully progressive home management plays out across the range of Bennett's writing. At times, his fiction and drama can appear as straightforward expositions of ideas put forth in his journalism, but Bennett's more complex narratives also strike notes of anxiety and uncertainty regarding the models of domestic efficiency which he otherwise endorses.

Bennett's domestic writing is closely related to his rationalism. Robert Squillace identifies Bennett's earlier work, up to the end of the War, with the attempted propagation of a planned liberal and rational society; thereafter, he claims, Bennett turned against his previous optimism.⁴ In fact, the situation is more complicated. By locating Bennett's

³ John Lucas, *Arnold Bennett: a Study of his Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1974), p.41. Clotilde De Stasio considers Bennett's editorship of *Woman*, focusing on his literary reviews and his attitudes to women, in 'Arnold Bennett and Late-Victorian *Woman*', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 28.1 (1995): 40-53. In noting that Bennett's fictional domestic scenes 'surely owe something to *Woman* as well as to memory', Margaret Drabble rather dismissively suggests that knowledge of furnishing, appliances and home management 'was not wasted' since Bennett became 'one of the few novelists who can write with sympathy and detail about the domestic preoccupations of women'. The biographical approach can be reductive: noting that Bennett 'moved from one dingy rented cottage to another', Drabble claims 'it is not surprising' that he wrote 'with such passionate enthusiasm about bathrooms, windows, plumbing, heating'. 'Family conversations at home must have been full of talk of property, which is reflected in the novels.' *Arnold Bennett* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1974), p.56, p.27, p.31.

⁴ Squillace, pp.112-3. Squillace argues that around 1916 Bennett turned against his previous optimism in rational planning which was expressed through both sympathetic characters and trusted, omniscient narration, and developed a complex fiction in which narrative perspectives intermingle and where Freudian unconscious drives,

engagement with rational efficiency in his longstanding interest in domestic organization, this essay shows how his espousal of a notion of social progress achievable through organisation went hand-in-hand, often in the same texts, with implied misgivings about this very programme. Indeed, the complexity of this position accounts for an uncertain narrative voice in many texts.

This essay turns initially to Bennett's non-fictional writing, looking especially at his deployment of the trope of efficiency, before moving to an early novel, *Anna of the Five Towns*, and its stage adaptation. In both his fiction and non-fiction, Bennett's advocacy of organisational models for efficient domestic life went hand-in-hand with anxieties and doubts about the method and the possibility of achieving its aims, all of which adds up to a nuanced picture of Bennett's attachment to models of rational planning and other forms of progressive liberalism. This suggests a further dimension to that John Batchelor calls 'the dilemma of the liberal imagination' in Edwardian England.⁵ For Batchelor, writing about John Galsworthy, that dilemma is focused on the inability of the novelist to both observe and coerce at the same time. With Bennett, it will be seen, that dilemma is both a formal question (of narrative voice) and a fundamental historical issue within liberal rationalism which is locatable in the domain of home management. Bennett may ultimately side with the necessity of efficiency, as it attempts to propel him and us towards greater productivity and easier lives, but he perceives the cost of so doing.

II

and other unforeseen irrationalities, deeply affect human experience. The novels of this later, more modernist Bennett are said to be 'riots of misperception and missed perceptions' (p.16).

⁵ John Batchelor, *The Edwardian Novelists* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1982), p.189.

When Bennett joined the staff of *Woman* in 1894, he began what was to be a career-long engagement with a popular discourse of domesticity that had found expression in magazines, advice books and trade journals since the mid-Victorian period. Launched in 1889, *Woman* was a relatively young entry in an already crowded market but over the following decade the penny weekly became a leader in its field. Later in life, Bennett was both proud of his role in that achievement and rather dismissive of the magazine at the same time.⁶ As assistant editor (from January 1894) and editor (November 1896-1900) of *Woman* – and as a contributor to journals such as *Hearth & Home*, and, in the 1920s, the *American Woman's Home Companion* – Bennett did much both to promote household management and to present his work within the wider context of domestic improvement. He contributed numerous articles to *Woman* under many pseudonyms and learned about a wide range of issues including growing herbs, managing servants, looking after pets, and bathing babies. As editor, he published more domestic articles, not less.⁷ His literary interests were merged into this context: he wrote stories for *Woman* and other domestic magazines, reviewed literary and popular fiction, and made sure that his own work was suitably reviewed – even if it meant writing the review himself. Under the pseudonym Sarah Volatile, Bennett reviewed *A Man From the North* using the approbatory terms of the 'scientific' domestic advice of the 1870s and 1880s, calling the novel 'clean, healthy and powerful'.⁸ His journalism and stories often appeared alongside columns by renowned domestic advisors such as Mrs C.S. Peel and Mrs (Charlotte) Talbot

⁶ See Arnold Bennett, 'Editing a Woman's Paper' in *Sketches for Autobiography*, ed. James Hepburn (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979).

⁷ Drabble (p.56) claims that after Bennett became editor, *Woman* published 'less purely domestic pieces'. Anita Miller more correctly suggests that from 1897 'a somewhat stronger domestic note' appeared. Anita Miller, *Arnold Bennett: An Annotated Bibliography, 1887-1932* (New York: Garland, 1977), xxxi.

⁸ Sarah Volatile, 'Books and Authors', *Hearth and Home* XIV, 3 March 1898, p.689. Bennett's brother Frank, using the name Frances, wrote a largely neutral review-notice of the novel in *Woman*, 8 March 1898, p.8-9.

Coke; he also reviewed and promoted the work of professional home advisors.⁹ As part of his extensive contribution to *Woman*, Bennett instigated and wrote a sixteen-part series, 'Household Notes', published in 1899 under the pseudonym Ursa Major.

The 'new journalism' of the 1880s and 1890s helped to propel a shift in domestic advice towards less regimented and more individualistic display. Magazines such as Harmsworth's *Forget-Me-Not* (1891-1918) and *Home Sweet Home* (1893-1901) typified the provision of cheap journals for women that comprised short, informal articles of home advice ('wrinkles'), mixed with some gossip and fiction.¹⁰ More durable titles soon followed: Pearson's *Home Notes* (1894-1957) was answered by Harmsworth with *Home Chat* (1895-1958). These penny-weeklies were aimed at aspirational middle-class housewives who did at least some of the housework themselves. They helped widen the readership for domestic magazines, addressing both household organisation and actual chores, and including a broader base of advertisers.¹¹ *Woman* declared its readers to be 'Up-to-date Womankind' and advertisers copied the idea and the phrase: Bennett's journal carried a clear agenda of modernization.¹² Advertisers in *Woman* included household brands (Cadbury's Cocoa, Hudson's soap), women's clothing (Peter Robinson of Oxford Street and Regent Street), furniture manufacturers and wholesalers (James Shoolbred of Tottenham Court Road), well-known publishers (John Lane's Keynote series) and other magazines (*Hearth and Home*, *The*

⁹ For example, Bennett recommended *Ten Shillings a Head for Housebooks* by Mrs Peel. 'Household Notes', *Woman*, 4 October 1899, p.9. Peel's book was itself clearly influenced by Bennett's earlier columns.

¹⁰ See Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own?* pp.192-4 and Beetham, *Victorian Women's Magazines: an Anthology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp.87-96.

¹¹ The advertising and readership of these magazines is discussed in Ros Ballaster, Margaret Beetham, Elizabeth Frazer and Sandra Hebron, *Women's Worlds: Ideology, Femininity and the Woman's Magazine* (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp.102-107.

¹² The phrase 'Up-to-date Womankind' appeared on the masthead. Oxo advertised as: 'Invented in 1900. OXO. The Up-to-date Fluid Beef. Up-to-date in Potency. Up-to-date in Price.' *Woman*, 28 November 1900, p.27.

Strand). In their features on decoration and furnishing, their 'tips' and advertisements, these magazines were mainstream components of an ideology of personal improvement. Wedded to technological progress and a feminised private sphere, while also addressing women in the workplace, they extended the political orbit of the Victorian domestic movement – and the woman advisor – in that, over time, they revised the assumption that ordinary homes would want to mimic those of 'ladies'.¹³ *Woman* and others disseminated the assumptions of the modern home that would fully emerge after the war: self-reliance, harmony and greater equality, better and cheaper technology, organized labour. These assumptions may be summarised by the terms *efficiency* and *comfort* – Bennett's understanding of which will be analysed shortly.

In this respect, domestic commentary in the 1890s and Edwardian period was increasingly free from the sometimes heavy-handed moralising of the previous generation, influenced by Henry Cole, with its rigid scrutiny of taste and echoes of Society. Charlotte Talbot Coke, who founded *Hearth and Home*, illustrates the shift to a more secular, democratised tone: in stating that decoration was 'an opening for individual opinion', she exemplified a liberal relativism that was still socially very well-to-do. She may dislike an ornament but she 'should be sorry to say it is "wrong"'.¹⁴ It was Coke who, in 1898, invited Bennett to become the regular book reviewer for her more up-market, glossier journal, giving him a platform for longer and more outspoken literary discussion than was available to him in *Woman*. The motto of Bennett's magazine – 'Forward! But Not Too Fast!', printed on the

¹³ De Stasio (p.44) emphasises the continuity between *Woman* and mid-Victorian home magazines; but see Nieswander (pp.115-145) and Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 2006), (pp.122-144) on late-Victorian shifts in domestic advice.

¹⁴ Cited by Cohen, p.111. On Cole and mid-Victorian advice, see Cohen pp.14-31.

masthead – comically captures the late-Victorian reformers’ spirit. In his play, *Milestones* (1912), which charts three generations of household and industrial change, Bennett uses one of the foremost mid-Victorian domestic magazines as a period marker. Rose, the young heroine at ‘the height of fashion’ in 1860, opens the play by declaring that she ‘got the design’ for the cushion cover she is knitting ‘from the *Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*’, famously associated with Mrs Beeton.¹⁵ Rose herself embodies the values of practicality, moderation and ultimately subservience, which were espoused in the ideology of the Victorian domestic movement, while also aiding the younger generation in their independence. The gentle comedy of Bennett’s play, with its rather safe patronisation of the independent woman, illustrates how ‘forward’ but ‘not too fast’ was his own liberalism.

Many of the columns that Bennett wrote for newspapers and magazines were collected and published separately as forms of domestic advice book. Two series for the *Manchester Daily Dispatch* became the chapters ‘England Again – 1907’ (a section of which discusses household organization) and ‘The British Home – 1908’ in the book *Paris Nights* (1913).¹⁶ The latter chapter was later abridged in the *Journal of Home Economics* in 1917. Among other domestic texts, *The Plain Man and his Wife* (1913) and *Our Women* (1920) were initially published in *The Strand* and *Cassell’s Magazine of Fiction* respectively (with near-

¹⁵ Arnold Bennett and Edward Knoblock, *Milestones* [1912] in *Modern Plays*, ed. Ernest Rhys (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1937), p.6.

¹⁶ ‘England Again – 1907’ first appeared as a weekly six-part series in *Manchester Daily Dispatch*, 11 January 1908 – 17 February 1908; the section on household organization was ‘Home’, 18 January 1908, p.4. ‘The British Home – 1908’ first appeared as a six-part series under the title ‘Is the Home a Success?’ in *Manchester Daily Dispatch*, 20 August 1908 to 5 September 1908. An abridged version of this series was later published as ‘The British Home’ in *Journal of Home Economics*, April 1917, pp.177-8. There appears to be no reason for the shift from ‘English’ to ‘British’ between the two series. Bennett thought of the initial articles as ‘a series of impressions of the New London’. He was paid 6 guineas per column which, he noted on 6 December 1907, was ‘50 per cent above my previous highest price’. *The Journals*, selected and ed. Frank Swinnerton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p.230. Both series were reprinted in *Paris Nights* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d. [1913]), from which they are cited in this essay.

simultaneous periodical publications in the United States). Some of these books were themselves reprinted under slightly different titles, and almost all went into subsequent editions. It is clear that Bennett's interest in household organization was not simply due to the necessity of journalistic work in his early career and forgotten thereafter. He would go on to write articles and stories for *Woman's Journal*, *Vanity Fair* and *Cosmopolitan*, while contributing domestic advice to newspaper readers of the *Sunday Pictorial*, *Sunday Express* and *Evening News* into the late 1920s.

Immersion in the late-Victorian and Edwardian discourse of domesticity formulated for Bennett what amounts to an ideology of domesticity, expressed in slightly different versions on numerous occasions and in many formats. No doubt it also constrained him, and so contributed to the repetition to be found in all those with a compulsion to write. Centred on efficient management rather than specific tasks, this ideology advocated the self-sufficient responsibility of the sealed unit of family life, financial prudence and on 'progressive' values. This ideology echoes many of the viewpoints of the new liberalism of the first decade of the twentieth century. In many cases, the topics and arguments of Bennett's articles and stories overlapped, and may be read as expressions of that ideology in-the-making. Ideas that have an initial appearance among his many pieces for *Woman* in the late nineteenth century reappear in more mainstream publications many years later and are re-articulated in various places in his fiction and plays.

III

One of the principal ideas in Bennett's domestic advice – and his distinctive contribution to the wider movement – was that the home should be run with the same efficiency associated with business. It is this refrain in particular that sum up his approach; its repetitions and

qualifications become an index of his commitment to modernity. Bennett first suggests that the home should be run like a business in his 'Household Notes' for *Woman*, where he justified his commentary, as 'one of these rare bachelors who run a household', by stating that he brought to the issue 'one factor which is usually lacking – namely, a mind well trained in business habits'.¹⁷ The idea appears frequently thereafter, including in *Journalism for Women: A Practical Guide* (1898) and the *Manchester Daily Dispatch* articles that became 'England Again – 1907' and 'The British Home – 1908', republished in full in *Paris Nights* (1913). The latter observed of its exemplary couple that Mr Smith must deign 'to learn the business of the home' and that Mrs Smith should cease 'to be an amateur in domestic economy'.¹⁸ 'England Again – 1907' had compared the home to a Department store complete with restaurant, crèche, dressmaker, horticulture and library.¹⁹ The idea resurfaces in *Married Life: the Plain Man and his Wife* (1921) in which the plain man is castigated for not running the home efficiently (this after the demise of Bennett's own marriage): 'a home, in addition to being a home, is an office and manufactory for the supply of light, warmth, cleanliness, ease, and food to a given number of people'.²⁰ Here the impersonal formality of the language reinforces the idea, which can still be seen, with no substantial modification, in Bennett's writing towards the end of this life, for instance in 'Home as a Business Concern' in the *Sunday Express* in 1928.²¹ In seeking to implement a utilitarian managerialism across diverse situations, this idea promotes individual responsibility while retaining trust in a rational system, apparently caring little for those traditions that would hinder progress.

¹⁷ Ursa Major [Arnold Bennett], 'Household Notes. By a Man', *Woman*, 19 July 1899, p.13.

¹⁸ Bennett, *Paris Nights*, p.336.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p.249-250.

²⁰ Arnold Bennett, *Married Life: the Plain Man and his Wife* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1921), p.123.

²¹ Arnold Bennett, 'Home as a Business Concern', *Sunday Express*, 17 June 1928, p.15.

Crucially, however, Bennett's writing on domesticity suggests that this call for efficiency is double-edged. Even these non-fictional pieces hints at a scepticism within the broader, positive advocacy. It seems inevitable that the home – divided and disordered as it so often is – falls short of the imagined business standard. If Mr and Mrs Smith need to be educated into efficiency, it does not necessarily mean that a planned rationalism achieves its goals. After all, it was essentially this reservation that prompted Bennett's criticisms of H. G. Wells, expressed initially in the domestic context of *Hearth and Home* in 1902. Reviewing Wells's *Anticipations*, he summarises the author's 'cry ... for efficiency' but notes his 'seven-stinged lash for the inefficient'; Bennett himself would want to agree, he says, but he reserves sympathy for the casualties of 'democracy' and support for its 'ethical idea'.²² Bennett stops short of explicit sympathy for the mishaps of domesticity, but a familiar understanding of these is his implicit impetus. As this essay goes on to show, Bennett's more complex fictions, including earlier novels such as *Anna*, reveal an ambiguity suggestive of a deeper anxiety towards the management he otherwise endorses. In this respect, the nuance of narrative voice, and the careful balancing of characters without explicit judgement or sentimentalism, sustains a richly complex engagement with the discourse of domesticity that permits flexibility, openness, even apparent contradiction.

The principle of efficiency in home life was part of Bennett's thinking prior to his initial encounter, around 1904, with the social evolutionary theory propounded by Herbert Spencer, which provided Bennett with a basis for noting causation, and so organization, in all facets of

²² E.A. Bennett, 'A Gossip About Books', *Hearth and Home* XXII, 16 January 1902, p.458.

life.²³ Spencer's emphasis on a direct link between material environment and mental states no doubt helped to fuel Bennett's concern for household arrangement, with its implicit suggestion that – as Victorian home advisors had long been saying – the home reveals the person. But from an early stage in his reading of Spencer, Bennett adopted his own Cartesian model of individual self-determination, asserting the dominance of rational will while acknowledging 'the collisions of existence'.²⁴

The term 'efficiency' took on its modern usage in the mid-nineteenth century, meaning no longer mere causation but henceforth implying an 'adequate power' and 'effectiveness', a 'fitness or power to accomplish' without wastefulness and according to 'the purpose intended'. Efficiency, then, was an economy of power. The OED further cites J.S. Mill's *On Liberty*: 'The greatest dissemination of power consistent with efficiency'.²⁵ In this sense, efficiency speaks to a particular valorization of work as an exercise in control (whether of oneself, or in the interaction between workers, or in the functioning of machinery). Bennett's success – his entire career – embodies that 'culture of work' which Franco Moretti calls 'the greatest symbolic achievement of the bourgeoisie'.²⁶ His writing was the means for him personally to achieve a modern bourgeois culture, in turn making a version of this world accessible to others by pitting new forms of authority (technology, business) against old

²³ Shortly after publication of *Clayhanger*, Bennett wrote of Spencer: 'the sense of causation [is] everywhere.... You can see *First Principles* in nearly every line I write'. *The Journals of Arnold Bennett*, vol.1 (London: Cassell and Co., 1932), p.383. Squillace (pp.86-95) discusses Bennett's adaptation of Spencer.

²⁴ 'My sense of security amid the collisions of existence lies in the firm consciousness that just as my body is the servant of my mind, so is my mind the servant of *me*.' Arnold Bennett, 'The Secret of Content', *The Savoir-Vivre Papers*, *T.P.'s Weekly*, 28 September 1906, p.402. The titles in which this piece was reprinted are telling of Bennett's thought: *The Reasonable Life* (1907), expanded as *Mental Efficiency* (1912).

²⁵ <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/59741>. See also Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois* (London: Verso, 2013), p.41.

²⁶ Moretti, p.43.

(religion, family). Yet despite Bennett's exhortations he could not finally reconcile this bourgeois 'culture of work' with the recalcitrant home.

Bennett's promotion of, and reservations towards, efficiency went hand-in-hand. In 'The British Home – 1908', he admits, in an unusually explicit admission, that 'daily experience proves' that what he calls 'the businesslikeness of the average business man' is in fact 'a vast hollow pretence'.²⁷ Bennett also cannot help pointing out some of the ways in which the home is not like a business: there is a plentiful supply of clerks, for instance, but it is difficult to recruit a maid.²⁸ It is not clear whence Bennett derived his confidence in the apparent efficiency of business, especially as he himself was well aware, from family travails and from his deep knowledge of the Potteries, of many examples to the contrary. In the closing section of 'England Again – 1907', Bennett discusses the pottery industry, which 'is English industry in little – a glass for English manufacture to see itself in'. While Bennett endorses technological 'progress' he is caustic about its actual achievements. Until recently, he says, 'scientific methods' were disparaged in the Potteries, and they often still are: 'We hated and loathed innovation. We do still.'²⁹ Bennett is full of praise for the 'will to work' among people in the Potteries, their 'combined endeavour', but progress has been slow: 'our roads are less awful.... Our sanitation is vastly improved'.³⁰ Bennett's first-person identification with the region is significant in addressing that 'dilemma of the liberal imagination': in siding with the slow-to-modernize potters, he nonetheless accepts that 'progress' is the common direction of all.

²⁷ Bennett, 'The British Home – 1908', p.333.

²⁸ The highpoint of domestic service was the late nineteenth century; between 1901 and 1911 the numbers of full-time maids decreased markedly, and continued to do so. See Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan; New York: St Martin's Press, 1975), p.151-165.

²⁹ 'England Again – 1907', *Paris Nights*, p.271.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.273, p.272.

Bennett's ambivalence is illustrative of an Edwardian and liberal attitude, shared in different ways by Wells and others, that trusts in technological progress while expressing, or at least implying, marked anxieties about its efficacy and its ethics. Since Bennett's purpose is usually to extol the virtue of the efficient home, it follows that he observes a need for such advice. He cannot help remarking, then, on forms of inefficiency. In 'The British Home – 1908', in a section called 'Spending – And Getting Value', that generic Englishman Mr Smith is said to have fallen behind his French and German equivalents in managing money. The actual standard of the home – its space and hygiene, etc. – is higher in England but the French eat better and live better. To Bennett, the discourse of domesticity is a symptom of English carelessness, and so answers a genuine need. 'The enormous periodical literature now devoted largely to hints on household management shows that we, perhaps unconsciously, realise a defect.'³¹

Comfort was one correlate of efficiency. Not simply a financial position, nor a form of luxuriousness or even materialism, comfort was, in Bennett's terms, the result of a successfully and rationally organised life that included both work and the household. In *Clayhanger* (1910), Edwin – based on the young Bennett – has his 'personal goods, great and small, ranged in the most careful order' so that his bedroom is 'a complex and yet practical apparatus for daily use, completely organized for the production of comfort' (no wonder he is drawn to Hilda Lessways with her 'youthful passion for order and efficiency').³² Comfort should be seen as a state of organisation, enhanced by technology, which enabled

³¹ Bennett, 'The British Home – 1908', *Paris Nights*, p.331.

³² Arnold Bennett, *Clayhanger* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp.303-304; *Hilda Lessways* (London: Methuen, 1911), p.30. Hilda's revolt against 'the odious mess of the whole business of domesticity' is in large part because 'it might be more efficiently organized' (p.38).

appropriate material enjoyment. Arguably Bennett saw the home, and not work, as the centre of life, but the two were (or should be) intimately connected. The physical proximity of work to home in *Clayhanger*, *The Old Wives' Tale*, *Riceman Steps* and other fictions is not only a device by which to compare their culture and order but also an indication of their potential complementarity.

Bennett's sense of comfort draws on Puritan and Methodist thought as established over the previous two centuries. In *Robinson Crusoe*, comfort is associated with 'necessary things', especially a table and chair; Moretti's analysis of the word *comfort* as a bulwark of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie refers to the 'profound common sense of its pleasures'.³³ Bennett's notion of comfort is perfectly at ease with the contemporaneous analysis by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. According to Weber, Protestantism helped to formulate the notion of comfort as the ethically legitimate, practical outcome of utilitarian principles. A 'worldly Protestant asceticism ... acted powerfully against the spontaneous enjoyment of possessions; it restricted consumption, especially of luxuries.'³⁴ In showing how comfort implied restraint and control, Weber was able to account for the manner in which Puritan and Methodist communities, such as those Bennett wrote about and was familiar with, condemned 'impulsive avarice', 'covetousness', and 'dishonesty' while at the same time valuing wealth acquired through labour as 'a sign of God's blessing'.³⁵ It did not take Weber or Bennett to point out the potential for hypocrisy that this value system

³³ Moretti, p.48; Moretti cites Defoe, p.48.

³⁴ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1976 [1930]), pp.170-1. Weber's essay was first published in German in 1904-5; the first English translation was published in 1930. Moretti discusses comfort and Weber, pp.44-51. As Moretti shows, Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* similarly attacks luxury as 'ornate, grotesque, inconvenient ... to the point of distress' (cited Moretti, p.48). Comfort, by contrast, is appropriate and efficient.

³⁵ Ibid. p.172.

allowed; readers of *Middlemarch*, for instance, would have been familiar with the self-interest of Bulstrode.

Comfort was the desirable outcome of hard work and of 'rational and utilitarian uses of wealth'.³⁶ In Weber's words,

The idea of comfort characteristically limits the extent of ethically permissible expenditures. It is naturally no accident that the development of a manner of living consistent with that idea may be observed earliest and most clearly among the most consistent representatives of this whole attitude to life [worldly Protestant asceticism]. Over against the glitter and ostentation of feudal magnificence which, resting on an unsound economic basis, prefers a sordid elegance to a sober simplicity, they set the clean and solid comfort of the middle-class home as an ideal.³⁷

Comfort, then, denotes a certain propriety and dignity. Weber's 'clean and solid comfort' illustrates the remarkable extent to which physical properties ('all that is solid', in Marx's famous phrase) came to denote standards of moral and personal well-being that were entirely consistent with the ethic he describes. Bennett's short story 'Mr Penfold's Two Burglars' opens with an account of the home of the main character, which has 'an air of comfort, of sobriety, good form, of success; one divined by looking at it that the rent ran to about £80'.³⁸ This may be the kind of description that Woolf mocked, wherein the physical structure displaces personal interiority, but it also applies a moral and cultural codification of

³⁶ Ibid. p.171.

³⁷ Ibid. p.171.

³⁸ Bennett, 'Mr Penfold's Two Burglars', in *The Loot of Cities*, p.175.

character. The description brings out the link between comfort and worldly success, particularly the value of comfort as a form of restraint or understatement: the ultimate accolade 'success' is reached through the conventionality of 'good form' which in turn is built on 'sobriety'. Both Weber and Bennett are well aware of the hypocrisies in such apparent sobriety and simplicity. Yet this Methodist sense of comfort was no doubt one source of the powerful notion of simplicity that came to dominate English middle-class taste. For tasteful restraint has become a style – paradoxically one that can be paraded and enjoyed – marking 'the middle class home as an ideal' in Weber's phrase. Bennett was attuned to the way in which 'the moneyed classes' have fetishized period property; he instead favoured – at least for other people – 'thousands of cheap houses which for practical comfort and living infinitely surpass, for instance, Belgrave-square.'³⁹

IV

By foregrounding the organisation and materiality of the home, Bennett's fiction also contributes to debates about domestic design, management and values. This context complements Squillace's argument that Bennett had lost trust in rational planning by the time he came to write his later novels. Indeed, *Riceman Steps* (1923), in which home and business are virtually indistinguishable, concludes with a scene suggesting that pure efficiency or logic is a kind of miserliness, a soul-less life; there must be enjoyment and some emotional sway. However, the odd sentimentality of the ending, in which a maid asserts her independence but then decides to go back into service at the behest of a child, is at odds with the rational management and orderliness underpinning the novel's structure. Instead, *Riceman Steps*

³⁹ Bennett, 'Ill-Planned Homes of the Wealthy' (5 Dec 1929), *Books and Persons*, p.329.

painstakingly shows that excessive emotional or irrational tendencies (e.g. Henry Earlforward's obstinate miserliness) overwhelm sensible, moderate practicality. Violet, his wife, is no paragon of efficiency herself – her own failing shop is testament enough – but her gift of 'scientific cleaning' and 'the startling efficiency of her methods' are not at fault, and nor is the generally reasonable but impulsive maid, Elsie.⁴⁰ The marriage founders upon failure to observe Bennett's domestic cornerstones: shared responsibility and financial prudence. Efficiency implies moderation and the Earlforwards' downfall is due to their immoderate behaviour. Even in this late novel, then, rationalism is questioned but not dismissed. Indeed, Bennett had already been working through the question of rational efficiency in his very early work, fictional and non-fictional, prior even to reading Spencer.

Far more significant than a useful adjunct to his observational realism, the wider discourse of domesticity offered a framework and set of values with which Bennett's fiction engaged. Bennett structures a number of works around 'good' and 'bad' examples – pairs of friends, relations or partners – whose experiences illustrate appropriate values and courses of action. This structuring device borrows from didactic improvement tracts, such as were written by Hannah More and circulated to 'the deserving poor' in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Whereas these tracts were heavily moralistic, Bennett refrains from such heavy-handedness, allowing the examples to speak for themselves. The stories of marital relationships in *The Matador of the Five Towns* (1912) often echo and develop this structure, as, more simply, does the tale of 'Alpha' and 'Omega' in *Married Life: The Plain Man and His Wife*. However, Bennett's observational tone and layered narratives sometimes complicate the ready-made distribution of authorial sympathy, as in *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902).

⁴⁰ Bennett, *Riceman Steps* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), p.97, p.95.

The scaffold of *Anna of the Five Towns* is one of 'good' and 'bad' examples: Anna's practical moderation, as seen in her kitchen, contrasts with the opulence of Beatrice's luxurious bedroom and drawing-room; the productive industrial management of Henry Mynors, exemplified by his efficient works, contrasts with the ramshackle disorder of the works run by Titus Price. In this light, Bennett's characterisation and structure can appear derived from didactic models. However, this novel, which was drafted while Bennett worked at *Woman* and completed after leaving the magazine and after his father's death, demonstrates a less clear-cut attitude to domestic management than its structure might imply. The novel and its stage adaptation display Bennett's pondering of efficiency, at home and at work, and offer a more ambivalent depiction than his non-fiction.

The account of Anna's kitchen (albeit 'the only satisfactory apartment in the house'), and of the dresser in particular, matches Bennett's conventional descriptions of ideal domestic environments: it is 'simple and dignified', its 'cleanliness' is praised, a result of 'conscientious labour'.⁴¹ Above all, 'Everything was in perfect order'.⁴² The revelation that Anna takes a functional, utilitarian attitude – she looks on it merely as 'the dresser', lamenting that 'it contained no cupboard' – anticipates her acceptance of the managerial, efficient Mynors as husband.⁴³ De Stasio rightly places Anna in the context of Victorian domestic advice, but her claim that Anna initially 'appears as the ideal housewife in the Beeton tradition' and that this 'figure of the contented housewife' is then 'somehow "deconstructed"' is slightly awry.⁴⁴ For sure, the novel's obvious purpose is to imply the

⁴¹ Arnold Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), pp.105,106

⁴² *Ibid.* p.107.

⁴³ *Ibid.* p.106.

⁴⁴ De Stasio, p.46, p.48.

stultification of such a marriage as Anna makes. The striving after cleanliness and order that Bennett endorses in his non-fiction appears also, in the fictional realm, to lead to the exact sort of entrapment that he left the potteries to escape. Yet the novel simultaneously admires Anna and what she stands for: her functional dresser, such as would be found in 'the kitchens of the people', and is now 'collected by amateurs of old oak', represents a cultural authenticity.⁴⁵ Since the kitchen is 'the highest possible certificate of Anna's character' (that coded 'common ground' of property here made explicit by Bennett), the narrative promotes sympathy with her, yet her values of moderation and efficiency are achieved without modernization.⁴⁶ The authenticity of Anna's kitchen is symptomatic of Bennett's reluctance to forego tradition.

Bennett's need to marry Anna's values to modernization is seen in her attachment to Mynors. The kitchen scene is aestheticized within a narrative frame, thereby signalling its structural significance. Initially, at the threshold, Mynors and Anna 'looked at the kitchen as at something which they had not seen before', echoing Bennett's call for 'the novelist' to 'cherish and burnish this faculty of seeing crudely, simply, artlessly, ignorantly'.⁴⁷ Mynors' departing remark underlines the aestheticization of the scene: not only is it 'the nicest room' he knows but 'the place was like a picture'.⁴⁸ The narrative viewpoint has thus become aligned with that of Henry Mynors, and this induces an awkwardness. It is difficult not to see Bennett endorsing Mynors' judgement that 'there is nothing to beat a clean, straight kitchen', and even lending some weight to Mynors' follow-up that 'It wants only the mistress in a white

⁴⁵ *Anna of the Five Towns*, p.106, 105.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p.107. 'House property was the common ground from which the Edwardians found it easy to proceed to intimacy'. Virginia Woolf, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown* (London: Hogarth Press, 1924), p.17.

⁴⁷ *Anna of the Five Towns*, p.105; Arnold Bennett, *The Journals*, p.28 (11 January 1897).

⁴⁸ *Anna of the Five Towns*, p.107.

apron to make it complete'.⁴⁹ Bennett looks forward to modernized homes while quietly lamenting the erasure of the authentic: there is a sad inevitability, in Bennett's terms, to that fact that Anna and Mynors will eventually 'do up' the Price's dilapidated Georgian house.

The 'picture' of the kitchen makes clear that the aesthetic and the authentic are values that complicate the drive to efficiency. Bennett makes several further analogies between tools or apparatus, often items of household use, and aesthetic appreciation. In *Clayhanger*, the hot water system 'affected and inspired Edwin like a poem'.⁵⁰ In the final novel of the Clayhanger trilogy, *These Twain* (1916), which sees Edwin and Hilda struggle for control of their new home, Edwin has installed a new radiator - 'his precious toy, his pet lamb, his mistress' - which takes pride of place alongside a reproduction of Bellini's *Agony in the Garden*.⁵¹ Bennett's writing is often taken to suggest that the aesthetic can exist even in the most ordinary situation - a point he himself made. That might be rephrased, however, in that what makes the boiler 'like a poem' and the kitchen 'like a picture' is their practical capability. The point is that the household item is aesthetic because it is functional and efficient.⁵²

Bennett does not camouflage his appreciation of the utilitarian in questions of design: the boiler and the radiator are described by how they work, and how effective they are at doing their job, not by appearance. It is in the sphere of manufacture, rather than that of art, where Bennett's narrators provide more specific knowledge: descriptions of the workings of an apparatus are vaguely compared to 'a poem' and 'a picture'. Greater attention is paid to the means of heating than to rumination on artistic form. One effect of this is that the self-

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p.107.

⁵⁰ Arnold Bennett, *Clayhanger* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p.173.

⁵¹ Arnold Bennett, *These Twain* (London: Methuen, 1936), p.9.

⁵² This is not to align Bennett with William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement. Bennett is not interested in the design per se, nor does he insist on a standard of 'taste'; instead, his focus on the functioning authentic object brings out its aesthetic quality.

consciously aesthetic is out-of-place in Bennett's fictional worlds, and in this regard he differs from some other Edwardian writers. Bennett's characters 'get on' through utilitarian work, they are not would-be cultural improvers like Forster's Leonard Bast nor do they harbour artistic dreams like Galsworthy's Young Soames. Whereas these other writers dramatize art and commerce into an opposition which is then partially overcome, Bennett's outlook does not conceive of the two as an opposition in the first place. 'High culture' does not exist in Bennett's worlds.

As an economic liberal – rather than a cultural liberal like Forster – Bennett's subject matter is the efficacy, and the inefficacy, of work, including work in the home. The real point about Edwin's new radiator is that it is 'only a half-measure': its 'costly efficiency ... somewhat atoned' for the 'imperfections' of relying on the kitchen boiler.⁵³ In his fiction, Bennett seems continually to be playing out efficiency and inefficiency, as if to demonstrate that these two terms really describe the same single economy. Like the hot water produced by these boilers, efficiency never seems to last very long, or else it is allied to more suspicious qualities.

The mutual economy of efficiency and inefficiency can be seen in a characteristic Bennett joke. In 'The British Home – 1908', the home of the Smith family possesses a kitchen range which 'incidentally heats the water for the bathroom, so that the bath water is hottest at about noon on Sundays, when nobody wants it, and coldest first thing in the morning, and last thing at night, when everybody wants it. (This is a detail. The fact remains that when hot water is really required it can always be had by cooking a joint of beef.)'⁵⁴ If domestic inefficiency can be passed off like this (a joke so good he made it again in the play

⁵³ *These Twain*, p.9.

⁵⁴ 'The British Home – 1908', *Paris Nights*, p.317.

*Milestones*⁵⁵), then the fictional business of Henry Mynors in *Anna of the Five Towns* offers the correctional model. It has been designed according to ‘the strictest economy of labour’, so that the ‘the clay travelled naturally in a circle’. The generation of steam ‘had no respite: after it had exhausted itself in vitalizing fifty machines, it was killed by inches in order to dry the unfired ware and warm the dinners of the workpeople’.⁵⁶ Mynors owns and manages ‘one of the best’ pottery works in the five towns, a ‘model’ to others.⁵⁷ The description of the works establishes it as a complement to Anna’s kitchen. The narrative juxtaposition of these spaces emphasises Bennett’s preoccupation with the idea that the home and the business should be organised along similar principles. Accordingly, Mynors’ works illustrates those same characteristics as Anna’s kitchen – proper order, cleanliness, and efficiency – and it does so as if it were a natural and inevitable feature of human development. Not for nothing is it called Providence Works.

Both Mynors’ factory and the British home are systems in which the by-product of a necessary mechanism can be useful elsewhere in the system. The difference, of course, is that Bennett’s account of the home in this case reverses that process so that the end is achieved through an unlikely means, although Bennett’s joke is itself a way of noting the capacity of the domestic system to make improvements of the kind that Mynors has installed. Indeed Bennett liked to record the increasing efficiencies afforded by invention and design, even as his enthusiasm for rational planning apparently abated. Edwin Clayhanger’s new house has made some of these improvements. It shows the same system employed by Mynors from the

⁵⁵ ‘GERTRUDE. So when you want a hot bath all you have to do –
MRS RHEAD. [Dryly.] All we have to do is to tell cook to put down a shoulder of mutton to roast. Very modern!’
Arnold Bennett and Edward Knoblock, *Milestones* [1912], Act I. In *Modern Plays*, ed. Ernest Rhys. London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1937, p.9.

⁵⁶ *Anna of the Five Towns*, p.116.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p.115.

perspective of the admiring user: 'as the fire that was roasting the joint heated the boiler, the water mounted again magically to the cistern-room and filled another cistern ... and thence descended, on a third journeying, to the bath and to the lavatory basin in the bathroom.'⁵⁸ Later in life, Edwin's new radiator fulfils a similar function, presumably with greater efficiency than a fire: 'The theory of it was that by warming the hall and the well of the staircase it softly influenced the whole house and abolished draughts.... Even in 1892 this middle-class pioneer and sensualist was dreaming of an ideal house in which inexhaustible water was positively steaming.'⁵⁹ Bennett clearly made some effort to keep his fictional homes up with the times. His light-hearted success *The Card* (1911), written within a year of publication of *Clayhanger*, allowed greater freedom to build an 'ideal house' such as Edwin might have dreamed of. By the early years of the new century, the house built by 'Denry' Machin for his mother, as part of his effort to 'instil reason' into her, is meticulously designed to be cleaned easily without a servant; it even features steaming hot water outside, not to mention electricity throughout, a vacuum cleaner ('the last word of civilisation') and 'a tank in which everything except knives could be washed and dried automatically'.⁶⁰ One of Bennett's recurrent observations seems to be that inhabitants of modern homes rarely live up to their surroundings: efficiency may be latent in technology but the interaction with human hand induces an inefficient stumble.

⁵⁸ *Clayhanger*, p.173

⁵⁹ *These Twain*, p.9.

⁶⁰ Arnold Bennett, *The Card* (London: Methuen, 1925), p.159, p.172, p.168. The first electric vacuum cleaner was patented in 1901. Witold Rybczynski reports that 'After 1907, when long-life nickel-chrome alloy resistors were perfected, efficient and durable electric appliances proliferated'. *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (New York: Viking, 1986), p.153. Hand-turned dishwashers were advertised in domestic magazines from the late-nineteenth century. The electric domestic dishwasher was not patented in the U.K. until 1923 when it was registered by William Howard Livens, inventor of the Livens Projector for firing drums of toxic chemicals. See the patent at: <http://worldwide.espacenet.com/publicationDetails/biblio?CC=FR&NR=579765&KC=&FT=E&locale=en> EP.

In *Anna of the Five Towns*, Mynors represents the triumph of modern efficiency. His re-use of natural clay, and his marriage to Anna, symbolically demonstrates an alliance of modernization with tradition. Yet the dual role of Mynors, as both rescuer from outright tyranny and suffocating paternalist, muddies an apparently simple structure. The lack of an alternative male lead – the largely absent figure of Willie Price being outshone by the other main characters – may be part of Bennett’s point about the desultory nature of life in the Potteries, but it results in a viewpoint that is carefully ambiguous, lending weight to Mynors while undermining him. Although the narrative voice seems overawed by the efficiency of Mynors’ works and his personal capability, it also carefully sets out, but does not labour, his hypocrisy. In this way, Bennett’s narrative suggests anxiety regarding the liberal economy that his domestic journalism usually sought to express.

On one hand, the author’s attachment to Mynors comes out in his role as a successful potter. He shares many of the qualities which Bennett advocated in his domestic discourse, and in order to emphasise these he has Anna ‘ponder’ them: ‘the organizing power, the forethought, the wide vision, and the sheer ingenuity and cleverness’ of Mynors and his system of manufacture are all ‘implied by’ his warehouse.⁶¹ Mynors has successfully welded a modern factory, exemplified by the ‘novelty’ of the batting-machine, to longstanding craftsmanship, thereby illustrating Bennett’s advocacy of modern methods and his un-nostalgic respect for the continuity of older ways.⁶² Bennett’s narrator proudly traces the industrial development of ‘this most ancient of crafts’, claiming for it an ‘extraordinary kinship’ between worker and work and an ‘intimate relation to human life’.⁶³ Pottery is

⁶¹ *Anna of the Five Towns*, p.124

⁶² *Ibid.* p.119.

⁶³ *Ibid.* p.115, p.114.

presented as a fundamental aspect of humanity: 'the last lone man will want an earthen vessel after he has abandoned his ruined house for a cave'.⁶⁴ In doing so, the narrator has anticipated later celebrations of pottery made by Bennett. In 'England Again – 1907', he writes: 'We make your cups and saucers – and other earthen utensils. We have been making them for over a thousand years.' Bennett advocates the use of what he calls 'scientific methods' to improve pottery manufacture.⁶⁵ The chapter that describes Anna's visit to Mynors' works includes a long paragraph in which the narrator celebrates the survival of tactile craftsmanship in the five towns. The potter's 'instinctive mastery' of clay is said to be accomplished with less loss of humanity than in other industries modernised by 'applied science'. In pottery, 'the fingers close' round the clay 'as round the hand of a friend', and the 'touch of finger on clay' is praised.⁶⁶ As with Anna's kitchen, a quasi-religious or mystical element shines through, momentarily dissolving the difference between tactile humanity and felt object. The 'fat and apparently clumsy fingers of the craftsman had seemed to lose themselves in the clay for a fraction of time, and the miracle was accomplished'.⁶⁷ Not dissimilarly, Anna's things had taken on the 'humanized air of use and occupation', her kitchen explicitly a shrine.⁶⁸ The following paragraph begins with the approbation that 'Mynors' works was acknowledged to be one of the best' and emphasises the efficiency measures in the design of the bank.⁶⁹ The end of the process results in 'calmness' and 'whiteness' in the warehouse and a product that is 'definite, precise and regular'; there is 'no trace here of the

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p.114.

⁶⁵ 'England Again – 1907', *Paris Nights*, pp.270-271.

⁶⁶ *Anna of the Five Towns*, p.115.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* p.119.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p.107.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* p.115.

soilure and untidiness incident to manufacture'.⁷⁰ Bennett's account of Mynors' works therefore brings together the application of ordered efficiency and continuity with the past, as in Anna's kitchen.

On the other hand, this model of 'organizing power' hints at a force beyond the narrator's grasp. The apparently instinctive feel of the potter is at odds with the process: reasoned efficiency leads to inhumanity. 'Neither time nor space nor material was wasted in this antheap of industry'.⁷¹ This productivity is for some workers 'the summit of monotony' as they 'interminably repeated some trifling process'.⁷² Bennett's evident admiration for efficiency runs up against deeper worries. It can also be difficult to discern where, if anywhere, the narrative is attempting to direct sympathy: on the one hand, it draws attention to the enforced drudgery of workers' acts, but on the other hand it often refuses to look beyond an impenetrable, female exterior (one worker employed by Mynors has a 'vacuously contemplative face; but God alone knew whether she thought'⁷³). Nor does Bennett's adaptation of naturalism sufficiently explain the inconsistency, for clearly – as with Anna's kitchen, for example – the narrative voice can be a directing and partial one. This confusion is also a very Edwardian paradox between sympathy for the social other and realisation of one's own exalted place.

Bennett's ambivalence towards efficiency is further seen in a discussion of utilitarianism which echoes his personal aspirations towards both popular and literary writing. The narrator registers reservations about utilitarianism by satirising Mynors when he declares

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p.123.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* p.121

⁷² *Ibid.* p.120.

⁷³ *Ibid.* p.121.

‘it’s better to please a thousand folks than to please ten’ and ‘the stuff’ is ‘as good as we can [make it] for the money’.⁷⁴ ‘The stuff’, of course, happens to be ‘toilet-ware’.⁷⁵ The narrator can then remark that this utilitarian view has ‘no sympathy with specialities, artistic or otherwise’.⁷⁶ There is a note of regret in this admission, a remorse for unfeeling efficiency, as if the utilitarian view were also the object of guarded ‘sympathy’ which it cannot itself express. Bennett himself, in writing *Anna*, pondered how to write literary fiction while, as Mynors puts it, ‘honestly meeting the public taste’.⁷⁷ His quarrels with George Sturt, and friendship with Eden Philpotts from 1897, record this process. Accordingly, he adopted a policy of producing both popular work, to earn his comfort and keep his name in the public view, and more ambitious writing which would in turn enable him to command a higher price for his popular productions.⁷⁸ Bennett’s career would go on to embody the very debate that Mynors’ works poses, without finally reconciling it.

V

In the summer of 1907, shortly before writing the articles collected as ‘England Again – 1907’ and the ‘The British Home – 1908’, Bennett adapted *Anna of the Five Towns* for the stage, declaring his ambition to unite ‘utility and beauty’.⁷⁹ The resulting play, *Cupid and*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* p.117.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p.124.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p.117.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p.117.

⁷⁸ Bennett’s dilemma is summed up in this letter to George Sturt, dated 28 March 1898: ‘I must earn brass, and writing novels isn’t the way to do it.... But, urged by Phillpotts & others who do not understand precisely how the land lies, I am tempted to go in solely for the novel.’ *Letters of Arnold Bennett: Volume II 1889-1915*, ed. James Hepburn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) p.107. On Bennett’s decision to become a professional writer see Drabble, pp.78-85.

⁷⁹ Bennett, *Journals*, p.213 (23 July, 1907). Bennett felt that his stage version of the novel was superior to the novel and ‘one of the best things I have ever done’. *Journal*, p.234 (31 August, 1907).

Commonsense, was first performed in January 1908. In the adaptation, Anna has become Alice Boothroyd, Mynors has been re-named Ralph Emery, and Willie Price is now Willie Beach. A new character, Emery's aunt, one Mrs Copestick, appears late in the play to provide a heavy-handed lesson. This four-act domestic drama features neither Alice's kitchen nor Emery's works. The 'parlour' has replaced the kitchen: the principal stage set, it is 'exceedingly plain and simple, also exceedingly neat and clean'. Much is made of Emery as a businessman, recently elected mayor, who 'succeeds in everything'.⁸⁰

There are some notable changes. Without a controlling narrative voice, the stage play makes a number of revisions which undermine the centrality of Alice / Anna and promote the previously more uncertain figure of Emery / Mynors. Bennett re-wrote the ending considerably, to the extent that Willie Beach does not commit suicide or become an object of pathos, as Willie Price does in the novel, but instead he is shown as a clearly unattractive figure, a victim of his own poor decision-making, thus emphasising that the heroine has made the correct choice in marrying the coolly efficient man of business. Alice and Emery are both rational, Mrs Copestick tells her and the audience, and 'there's nothing like commonsense for being happy'.⁸¹ Alice is praised as a good 'manager' of the home.⁸² Ralph's success as a modernising businessman ('all the latest dodges with steam') outweigh any romantic notions Alice may once have had for Willie, who appears unexpectedly at the end, an overweight, somewhat idle character married to a wealthy American heiress.⁸³ The stage version misses the symbolic environments of the home and the workplace, but it does convey more clearly

⁸⁰ Arnold Bennett, *Cupid and Commonsense. A Play in Four Acts. With a Preface on The Crisis in the Theatre* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d. [c.1910]), p.35, p.175.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.97.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.146.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.57.

than the novel that Alice / Anna's choice of partner was inevitable. In doing so, the play irons out some of the infelicities of the novel: it shows that the Emery / Mynors and Alice / Anna relationship does work, based on their compatible good management of home and business.

The adaptation also helps to bring out something of the uneasiness of the novel: the modern middle-class couple, governed by rational principles of moderation and efficiency, remake the past under the sign of progress, growing their business and beautifying their period home with second-hand furniture. Although both novel and adaptation align themselves primarily with Anna / Alice, rather than Mynors / Emery, they clearly establish the complementarity of the well-managed home and the successful business. The stage Alice is more hard-headed than the novel's Anna. 'Business is business' she tells the unfortunate Willie Beach, and the phrase provides the impetus for this inalienable social history, to the extent that Willie himself repeats it approvingly even as it drives him away from his home.⁸⁴ The phrase suggests an inevitability, and impersonality, to decisions taken in the interests of maximal profit; its use as a standard cliché, moreover, might imply an evasiveness, an unwillingness to grapple with detail, and even, then, an unease over the very rational efficiency it seeks to endorse.

When Bennett published *Cupid and Commonsense*, in 1909, he added a Preface, 'The Crisis in the Theatre', written in March 1908. Bennett's analysis echoes the advocacy, and disquiet, over a 'businesslike' rationalism found in *Anna of the Five Towns* and *Cupid and Commonsense*. His reading of the past decade of London theatre performs a tension between, on the one hand, a faith in artistry against commercialism, and, on the other hand, a trust in the rationalism that underpins commercial interests.

⁸⁴ Alice is the first to use the phrase. *Ibid.*, p.59, p.60.

The crisis, as spelt out by Bennett, was that London's theatres had grown so numerous and expensive that a large percentage were unable to stage anything that would not be a complete loss and nearly half of all performed plays 'cannot conceivably interest any person of cultivated taste'. Less than ten per cent are staging 'works of art'.⁸⁵ There is a new demand for dramatic experience, seen in the growth of theatres, but that does not reflect an artistic sensibility: the demand is uncultivated (an 'immense mass of infantile interest'), the middlemen who would cater for it are too dependent on tired models; there is no space for art to be performed.⁸⁶ This 'crisis', then, is another version of that utilitarian problem discussed by Henry Mynors and Anna, and faced by Bennett and other professional writers at the turn of the century. As with Anna, Bennett suggests that a cultural industry needs an artistic avant-garde from which 'models' are adapted for popular use.

Bennett's approach to this 'crisis' is initially to commend his own experiences 'in various business offices' and as a writer of unperformed plays.⁸⁷ It might be revealing that he goes on to describe 'the literary expert' as 'the man versed in all the complicated *organisation* of literature' – and no doubt he sees himself as just such a literary businessman, one of 'organizing power' (to use Anna's phrase for Mynors).⁸⁸ His assumptions are displayed when he comes to describe how the crisis came about. Theatres have grown in number not due to interest in plays but just as hotels, restaurants, etc. have grown; they are a luxury item, not an art. From this functional point of view, the nation is richer due to 'extraordinary improvements in mechanical production'. A better educated populace is the result of the

⁸⁵ Arnold Bennett, 'The Crisis in the Theatre' in *Cupid and Commonsense*, p.9.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p.22.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p.7.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p.25. My emphasis.

1871 Education Act. The intellectual 'impulse' is 'due directly' to 'statesmanship and to the application of scientific discovery'.⁸⁹

The current state of English theatre, then, turns out to be another version of Mynors's works, even of Clayhanger's home. Built on the achievements of rational order, organised on 'scientific principles', they become ultimately spaces that suffocate art and individualism. Yet however much Bennett might wish for some such artistic leadership as he envisages, he remains firmly rooted in the assumptions and credentials of the businessman, attempting to instil order to a place – the home, the theatre – where order, and disorder, take many and complex forms. That is Bennett's dilemma. Ideally, competing interests would be reconciled, as in the poetic radiator and picturesque kitchen, but Bennett's writing shows itself principally to be grappling with the relentless strains of managerialism.

The use of the phrase 'business is business', and variants upon it, is indicative of the uneven ideological imprint of Bennett's work. At once economically liberal, propounding 'progress', but also alive to individual suffering, Bennett's writing at times reaches for such stock phrases as summaries of historical shifts which they also closely observe. Bennett was not above using the same dictum, for instance in his paternalistic advice to women journalists. In this pamphlet, Bennett distinguishes between home practice and business practice to emphasise the necessity of following the unspoken rules of the latter.⁹⁰ A similar point had previously been made by the anonymous advisor in the 'Fireside Talks' section of the domestic magazine *Home Notes*:

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* pp.21-2.

⁹⁰ E.A. Bennett, *Journalism for Women: A Practical Guide* (London: John Lane, 1898), p.11.

‘Business is business’ we often hear, and women who earn their own livings have special need to remember this, for we are not living in an age of chivalry, but at the end of the nineteenth century, when political economy, and the survival of the fittest are far more thought of than old-world deference and respect for our sex.⁹¹

It is clear that Bennett accepted and reproduced some aspects of the late-Victorian domestic movement, and extended it to the point that the feminized home should echo the supposed efficiency of the male workplace. The corollary of his modernising insistence that men should take closer interest in the home was that the home in turn should echo the (male) assumptions of the business place. For Bennett, business is business, and so is the home.

It can be seen, then, that the ideological impetus of Bennett’s writing exists in a complex relationship with the various non-fictional, fictional, and dramatic forms in which it appears. Through his advocacy of practical management in the home, Bennett explored the economy of efficiency and inefficiency that underpinned liberal rationalism, both endorsing and questioning it. That he could hold to this ambivalence was surely in large part due to his own writing practices, both hankering for prestige and, in a characteristic gesture, counting up his annual tally of words and earnings. It also helped to make his writing an index of a particular shift in the discourse of domesticity. For Bennett’s initiative towards ordered efficiency was a key marker in the modernization of post-war homes.

⁹¹ ‘Fireside Talks’, *Home Notes*, vol.2 1895, pp.193-4, cited in Margaret Beetham, ed. *Victorian Woman’s Magazines*, p.89.