

**Please cite the Published Version**

Thompson, Susannah (2022) Spark's Spinners: Bedsits and Boarding Houses in the Novels of Muriel Spark. In: The Crooked Dividend: Essays on Muriel Spark. Occasional Papers (24). Association for Scottish Literary Studies, Glasgow, pp. 44-62. ISBN 9781908980335 (paperback); 9781908980342 (ebook)

**Publisher:** Association for Scottish Literary Studies

**Version:** Accepted Version

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**Additional Information:** This is an accepted manuscript of a book chapter which appeared in The Crooked Dividend: Essays on Muriel Spark, published by Association for Scottish Literary Studies

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## Spark's Spinsters: Bedsits and Boarding Houses in the Novels of Muriel Spark

Before Bridget Jones, the reactionary 1990s caricature of the single woman living alone, mid-twentieth century British literature teemed with more enviable unmarried role models. From Miss Roach in Patrick Hamilton's 1947 *The Slaves of Solitude*, Josephine Tey's Marion Sharpe in the 1948 novel *The Franchise Affair* or Barbara Pym's protagonists of the 1950s (Belinda in 1950's *Some Tame Gazelle* or Mildred Lathbury in her 1952 *Excellent Women*) the spinsters of these works were women of substance and depth of character: adventurous, intellectual and charismatic. In taking centre stage as protagonists, these subversive spinsters (and other unmarried women of all types) appear in spite of, or perhaps in response to, the dogged literary trope of the marginalised, desperate, lonely 'old maid'. Appearing in literature when they do, these characters also reflect the historian Katherine Holden's point that there was an 'invisible majority' of women after the war who were not living within family structures, who 'lived in lodgings, boarding houses or institutions or who had no permanent home'.<sup>1</sup>

If 'the bedsit's modest dimensions have been seen to be spinster spaces, fit and proper for the woman who is neither an Angel of the House nor a mistress of the streets'<sup>2</sup>, this essay contends that in their bedsits and boarding houses, Muriel Spark's spinsters – and Spark herself – both single-handedly and collectively undermine the loaded associations of the 's' word. As Judy Little has noted, 'the spinster character, transformed several times, seems to have a special attraction for Spark, herself single for most of her life'.<sup>3</sup> In many of Spark's novels written or set in the 1950s and 60s spinsterhood and bedsit living was not a problem to be solved, but a lifestyle which afforded considerable freedom, even when those freedoms were not always economic.

By the time Muriel Spark began her career as an editor and writer in the late 1940s, Virginia Woolf's classic 1929 lecture-essay *A Room of One's Own* had already explored the connection between material conditions and the ability to think and write.<sup>4</sup> Woolf famously proposed that the requirements for women's creative freedom were a room of one's own and independent means. Having both, according to Woolf, would provide the space and time requisite for writing. Woolf deemed an income of around five hundred pounds per year necessary – the precise amount left to her by an aunt in 1918, the year of Spark's birth. By 1929, following the publication of the 1928 lecture as *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's own room was presumably comfortable, warm, and decorated Omega Workshop-style. The lock on the door of 'one's room' avoided interruption and distraction while 'five hundred a year' (equivalent to around thirty-two thousand pounds in 2020) removed the need to be economically dependent on a man or to have to take on paid employment outside of writing.

To Spark, Woolf was a 'spoilt brat'.<sup>5</sup> Melinda Harvey has argued that Woolf's 'class-blind rubric of the room of one's own' has posited the bedsit 'as a utopian site of female creativity and freedom' by a number of feminist scholars 'confused with the kind of rooms that money – and five hundred pounds a year is real money – could supply.' Rather, she claims that the bedsit has been overlooked 'for what it usually is: a locus of economic hardship and social deprivation as well as a site of intellectual and sexual freedom.'<sup>6</sup> In Muriel Spark's case, apart from the occasional lifelines thrown *in extremis* by friends and supporters, her material conditions were far more meagre than those of Woolf. Until the publication of *The Comforters* in 1957 her income was earned through editing and secretarial work that she undertook alongside writing criticism, short stories and poems. Far

less than Woolf's five hundred, she had no legacy or invisible means of support and endured periods of extreme poverty and hunger. Spark was 'from a background quite at odds with the tenor of her prose' and claimed that she 'had always had to struggle'.<sup>7</sup> Her London years have been described as 'years of striving and obscurity' where 'she lived by her pen, in poverty, in a succession of tiny abodes'.<sup>8</sup> As such, Spark's 'succession of tiny abodes' were 'one's own' only to the extent that she had a dedicated room to herself within larger communal residences. She lived in five different rooms in a decade but it was these circumstances, as frugal as they could be, which allowed her to produce such a prolific body of writing in a relatively short period. The very conditions necessary for Spark to create her early novels (solitude, time, the absence of housekeeping responsibilities and dependents) became rich material for her work. The bedsit was both a site of production and representation and her domestic arrangements during her bedsit years were reflected in semi-autobiographical novels and stories throughout her life. Spark once wrote that in order to describe someone's life you needed little more than just 'a glance through an open door as you're going up the stairs [...] a glimpse of the room before the door shuts.' If this is the case, it is hard to think of an arrangement more suitable for a writer than the observation and character study provided by space of the bedsit or boarding house.<sup>9</sup>

While Spark does not avoid describing the discomfort, claustrophobia, and practical hardships of bedsits and boarding houses, she was not concerned with the self-pity and melancholia of upper-class women who have found themselves in reduced circumstances (such as Sara in Virginia Woolf's *The Years* of 1937 or Anna in Jean Rhys's 1934 *Voyage in the Dark*). As Parul Sehgal has noted, Spark 'simply seemed to find no romance in female abjection'. She may have been 'fascinated by suffering' but 'it was an active, robust kind of

suffering that she liked, whereby hunger whetted one's wits. Her women are not enamoured of their anxiety, of their moods and wounds'.<sup>10</sup> Spark's struggles with her mental and physical health – directly related to lack of money during her period in London – are well documented (in Martin Stannard's biography, for example). Her characters similarly experience problems at work, have run-ins with fellow lodgers and boarders, deal with intrusive, interfering landladies, suffer delusions and paranoia and eke out a living in cramped quarters. But in spite of this, Spark – and her leading spinsters and widows – are, for the most part, cheerful, resourceful, capable and determined. Sometimes they thrive in the conditions of the bedsit and boarding house, enjoying the relative freedoms, opportunities and pleasures offered by affordable rooms in the capital. Spark's protagonists are not confined by their living spaces but rather seem to move between and across class barriers with impunity. They move outside and beyond their rooms using public transport, walking to parks and cafes, going to work, playing *flâneuse*. In Spark's novels, women are not excluded from the sites and spaces of modernity and participate fully in public life, but they also reveal a number of environments and experiences specific to women. There is little sense of spatial confinement in Spark's novels, either inside or outside the home. In *A Far Cry from Kensington*, sacked for the second time for her forthright opinions, Mrs Hawkins whiles away her time riding around London suburbs on the tops of buses, eavesdropping on fellow passengers' conversations (disappointingly dull – never a 'general topic') as she sails through Dagenham, Southall, Ewell and Surbiton.<sup>11</sup> *Loitering with Intent* begins in a Kensington graveyard on a sunny day, where Fleur Talbot is writing a poem and avoiding her landlord, to whom her rent is overdue. Despite being alone and struggling financially, Fleur is happy, working on her first novel, living in a bedsit and making ends meet through secretarial work.<sup>12</sup>

In her 2017 book *British Boarding Houses in Interwar Women's Literature*, Terri Mulholland has argued that a distinct literary sub-genre emerged in Britain between the wars, in which women writers used the space of the boarding house to articulate women's changing social roles.<sup>13</sup> Though this is never explicitly addressed in Spark's novels, many of her characters reflect such changing gender roles in the world of work. This is particularly apparent in her early novels, written in London in the late 1950s and early 1960s where the interconnected themes of single women, creative work and boarding houses appear across a number of works. These interests reappear in two of Spark's later novels published in the 1980s which return to mid-century London. Over a quarter of Spark's twenty-two novels are set in small rented flats, bedsits and boarding houses and many feature unmarried women in central roles. Her autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae*, published in 1992, similarly contains lengthy, detailed descriptions of her life in the bedsits and boarding houses which formed the mainstay of her accommodation between the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s.<sup>14</sup> In a further six novels, her characters outside conventional or nuclear family homes in 'closed world' communal settings including a nursing home (*Memento Mori*), a hospital (*Reality and Dreams*), a hotel (*The Drivers' Seat*), a convent (*The Abbess of Crewe*), an upstairs/downstairs style 'big house' (*Not to Disturb*) and a Swiss finishing school (*The Finishing School*).

After a childhood living with her family in a tenement flat in Bruntsfield, Edinburgh, Spark married and moved to Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia) and it was there that her experience of boarding house living began. Spark's 1961 story 'The Curtain Blown by the Breeze', was based on a story told to her 'by a smug, self-satisfied South African Dutch woman of about forty-five, whom I met in one of the many boarding-houses I lived in during

my married life'.<sup>15</sup> Her 1982 short story 'Bang-bang you're Dead' is another fictionalised account of boarding house life which recounts the death of Spark's friend and fellow lodger Nita McEwan, who was shot in 1939 in the house they shared. Spark returned to the UK in 1944 after separating from her husband and making arrangements for the care of her son. Initially, she lived at The Helena Club at 82 Lancaster Gate, a model for The May of Teck Club in the 1963 novel *The Girls of Slender Means*. Cheap but elegant, The Helena Club housed up to 120 working women, provided two meals per day and had maids to clean rooms and change beds. For £1 12s 6d per week including meals, Spark had one of the more expensive single rooms on the top floor. The social hierarchy of the boarding house (once a private residence) is described by Spark in *The Girls of Slender Means*: the ground floor houses the dining room, offices, recreation room and drawing room; the first floor is occupied by the youngest residents in curtained off cubicles; the second floor offered shared rooms for two to four young women looking for bedsits; the third floor mixes prim young women and slightly older career women; while the top floor, paralleling The Helena Club in real-life, accommodated the most sophisticated and cultured women. With periodic returns to The Helena Club, Spark moved into different bedsits and lodgings in the South Kensington area over the next few years including a ground floor room in a Georgian house at 1 Vicarage Gate on Kensington Church Street (1949), larger furnished fourth floor rooms at 8 Sussex Mansions on Old Brompton Road (1950), and a room at 1 Queens Gate Terrace (1953). She left Kensington to move to 13 Baldwin Terrace in Camberwell in the mid-1950s, her home for over a decade before leaving the UK for good in the mid-1960s. Even after moving to New York City and Rome, she repeatedly returned to her attic rooms at Baldwin Terrace where she wrote *Memento Mori*, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, *The Bachelors* and much of *The Girls of Slender Mean* – three of the four are set in boarding houses and bedsits.

In Spark's novels the liminal, transient space of the boarding house functions as far more than mere backdrop, allowing plot devices to emerge with ease (eavesdropping, overhearing, spying, stealing) while also acting as essential aspects of characterisation, particularly in her representations of middle-aged and elderly women (and also, less flatteringly, of middle-aged bachelors). It could be argued that the apparently trivial, quotidian details of the domestic lives of characters such as Collie, Greggie and Jarvie in *The Girls of Slender Means*, for example, reveal insights about women's lives that do not conform to 'the marriage plot'. Gerry Carruthers, in his essay *Ghost Writing: The Work of Muriel Spark*, writes that 'while not a feminist in any conventional sense, Spark's 'charting of the experience of the female protagonist in her fiction represents a profound fictional essaying of the woman in society and the world'.<sup>16</sup> In Spark's own words, the 'old maids of settled character' in *The Girls of Slender Means* lived alongside flighty debutantes, sharing with them 'the graceful attributes of a common poverty'.<sup>17</sup> Of the younger women, it is only Jane Wright who remains a spinster at the book's end, yet it is only Jane who is described as 'intellectually glamorous'. As Hope Howell Hodgkins has observed in her article 'Stylish Spinsters: Spark, Pym and the Postwar Comedy of the Object', Jane is 'no pathetic single woman, but a tough observing consciousness, like the author herself [...] it is not the Schiaparelli-stealing Selina but the unalluring Jane that [Nicholas] recalls "years later in the country of his death – how she stood, sturdy and bare-legged on the dark grass'.<sup>18</sup>

Even where Spark's spinsters eventually marry or go on to form partnerships, as Nancy Hawkins does in *A Far Cry From Kensington*, there is little sense that these attachments have been sought out or that prior to them, the women felt diminished by their absence. Rather than actively seeking relationships, in fact, it is often the spinsters and widows who are



sought-after, propositioned or pursued by would-be suitors, suitors who are usually rebuffed or strategically diverted. In creating sexually desirable, sometimes sexually active, middle-aged women within novels that often treat sex as 'small potatoes'<sup>19</sup> when compared with what else life can offer, Spark again rejects the 'loser in love' Havisham-esque spinster caricature. Even Miss Brodie's long-lost lover Hugh is relegated to the status of a literary MacGuffin in the narrative. With Hugh gone, rather than sleep with the married Teddy Lloyd, Brodie is simply 'working it off' with Gordon Lowther.<sup>20</sup> Fleur Talbot, in *Loitering with Intent*, seems to like men, but ultimately regards them as too time-consuming, a distraction from her writing. When the tiresome Beryl Tims asks if Fleur is going to get married, she responds 'No, I write poetry. I want to write. Marriage would interfere.' When Beryl suggests she could get married, have children and write after the children have gone to bed, Fleur simply smiles and makes Beryl Tims furious. In another episode, Dottie, the 'awful wife' of her lover, Leslie, confronts Fleur with the affair, only to be told 'I love him on and off when he doesn't interfere with my poetry and so forth. In fact, I've started a novel which requires a lot of poetic concentration because, you see, I conceive everything poetically. So perhaps it will be more off than on with Leslie.'<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in *The Comforters*, Caroline finds her lover Lawrence, and men in general, secondary if not dispensable. Writing of the novel, Hope Howell Hodgkins cites John Updike's bemused question 'Where else in the fiction of the fifties do we find a heroine whose heterosexuality is so calmly brought forward and assigned a secondary priority?'<sup>22</sup> If it puzzles Updike, the question puzzles Spark's male characters more.

Almost all of Spark's central characters, both men and women, live lives out of synch with conventional family structures. In 2007, the Scottish literary critic and novelist Jenny

Turner, discussing the critic James Wood's claim that Spark's novels eluded the features usually associated with 'greatness', wrote that 'one of Spark's disqualifications from "greatness" is her lack of interest in families – was there ever a "great" novelist who could manage without this mighty social and fictional institution? Did Spark ever write with conviction about even one? When you think about it', Turner writes, 'you realise it is exactly the way the novels swerve round family, child-bearing, romantic love and so on that lends them their delightful perversity, their very sense of self. Without family – as a married man's mistress, a home-wrecker, in fact, Fleur [the central character in *Loitering with Intent*] begins her story in catty bohemia."<sup>23</sup> And not only does Spark swerve around family, her characters are often frankly dismissive of pregnancy, children and child-rearing. This stands in contrast to contemporaneous work by writers such as Lynne Reid Banks or Margaret Drabble, whose novels share a number of thematic elements with Spark, but centre on bedsit-bound motherhood as a profound journey or rite of passage. Spark's work is rather more wry in her handling of the subject. *Loitering with Intent's* Fleur Talbot tells us that Edwina, Sir Quentin's mother, 'bore very well the fact her son was a rotter'.<sup>24</sup> For Dorothy, in *The Girls of Slender Means*, an unwanted pregnancy is announced in passing amidst 'a waterfall of debutante chatter'. "Filthy luck. I'm preggars", says Dorothy, as she pops her head around Jane's bedroom door.<sup>25</sup> And in *A Far Cry From Kensington*, Mrs Hawkins is irritated by the assumption, on the part of fellow lodger Isobel and her overbearing father, that she is, almost by default, 'motherly' and therefore interested in Isobel's unplanned, extra-marital pregnancy. To Mrs Hawkins' anger, Isobel continues to visit the rooming house even when she secures a flat of her own. On arriving home to find Isobel sitting on the bed with William (Mrs Hawkins' new boyfriend and fellow lodger) we are told by the protagonist that Isobel 'didn't for a moment think I could be the part of his life I now was [...] She

continued to think, speak and act as if I was motherly. She was wrong [...] To be motherly, I felt, was her role'.<sup>26</sup> Isobel herself treats the matter as an inconvenience at worst. In Spark's own life, it is almost tiringly and gender-specifically well documented that Spark's parenting skills were less than sparkling, and that while officially a mother, she was not motherly. Paraphrasing Cyril Connolly, Spark's biographer Martin Stannard has noted that 'her pram was always to remain in someone else's hall.'<sup>27</sup>

In many of Spark's novels, the reader is offered a portrait of male and female experience largely unbound by 'significant others', be they romantic partners or dependents. Spark's spinsters in particular are very rarely presented as characters to be pitied, unlike the persistent stereotype – in literature and in life – of the vulnerable, desperate, childless single woman. In *Loitering with Intent*, Spark reimagines herself as Fleur, describing her 'autobiographical artist figure as a spinster, even though Spark herself had been married', choosing to 'reimagine her early life as if she had been a cheerful, self-assured, never-married woman'.<sup>28</sup> If spinsterhood was a terrifying prospect in much Eighteenth and Nineteenth century fiction (Miss Bates in Jane Austen's *Emma* is one such example), its literary legacy has been hard to shake even in the Twenty-first. Whatever their literary merit, recent novels such as Ottessa Moshfegh's *Eileen*, Claire Messud's *The Woman Upstairs*, Harriet Lane's *Alys, Always*, Zoe Heller's *Notes on a Scandal*, Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman* or Gail Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* continue to cast spinsters variously as odd, lonely, obsessive, creepy or downright sinister. The spinster in popular culture is still frequently defined by Charles Dickens' mad, dusty and doomed Miss Havisham, the apotheosis of the jilted singleton in *Great Expectations*, while the 'thrum' of spinster-dread' abounds in the novels of Jane Austen and their endless

television adaptations.<sup>29</sup> Cat ladies, tweedy librarians and other spinster caricatures are threaded through culture. In the 1980 comedy film *Airplane!* the flight attendant (Lorna Patterson) tells the Dr Rumack (Leslie Nielson) that she has 'never been so scared'. Another character joins the conversation and Rumack asks how she is holding up. She too, 'has never been so scared' before adding 'but at least I have a husband'.<sup>30</sup>

In spite of the dominance of 'the marriage plot', the role of the spinster in both fiction and society began to change in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century, as writers and scholars including Chiara Briganti, Kathy Mezei, Sheila Jeffreys, Laura L. Doan, Niamh Baker, Katherine Holden, Emma Liggins, Judy Little and many others have eloquently and insightfully explored, often in relation to the specific living arrangements of single women as landladies, nannies, boarders or lodgers. In this period, a range of more interesting single women began to appear in literature: bluestockings, sleuths, detectives, activists and suffragettes. The tragic spinster trope continued, but it had competition. By the time Spark came to write her post-war novels, the image of the spinster in society had changed again and some of the more positive role models of the spinster in fiction had again begun to dissipate as Britain attempted to restore societal order and re-establish gender roles in the inter and post-war period. By the 1930s, images of women living in an impoverished state of 'spinster-dread' were combined with a broader suspicion of 'the surplus', and plucky, adventurous, intellectually curious spinsters had, by the 1950s and 60s, given way to increasing representations of single women *in extremis*: themes of alcoholism, unwanted pregnancy, back street abortion, abandonment, betrayal, sex work or affairs proliferated. Amongst these are Olivia Manning's 1955 *The Doves of Venus*, Lynne Reid Bank's *The L-Shaped Room*, Shena Mackay's *Music Upstairs*, Margaret Drabble's *The*

*Millstone* (both 1965), Nell Gunn's 1963's *Up the Junction* and many others. Heterosexual relationships (or the want of them) formed the central plot, with spinsters often cast as beleaguered, melancholy, lonely and desperate. That is not to say that we do not find such characters or themes in Spark's novels. Wanda, the Polish dressmaker in *A Far Cry From Kensington* is tormented and driven to suicide, while Lise in *The Driver's Seat* is perhaps the ultimate alienated spinster in fiction. Interestingly, Lise is the only one of Spark's spinsters to live completely alone (in an immaculate, self-contained apartment). Of all Spark's women, only Lise is truly isolated – there is no sign in her life of friends, neighbours or housemates who might have offered companionship, support or alleviated boredom. Yet however morbid or macabre her intentions, Lise is nevertheless more active than the passive, bedsit-bound spinsters of many of Spark's literary peers, whose characters wait in vain to be rescued or simply fade into diminished lives. Spark's single women, debutantes, spinsters, widows and divorcees are varied and distinctive. January Marlow, Joanna Childe, Jean Brodie, Barbara Vaughan, Caroline Rose, Louisa Jepp, Nancy Hawkins, Fleur Talbot, Jane Wright, Milly Sanders, Wanda Podolak, Lise and Collie, Greggie and Jarvie: all of these women differ enormously in terms of personality, appearance, age and occupation. Across her novels and short stories Spark's women get married, take lovers, go mad, pursue careers, die young, write novels, commit and solve crimes. They are complex, multi-faceted, and not always likeable: one is an admirer of Mussolini, another complicit in her own murder.

In general, though, 'the spare', 'the surplus' or the U.F. (Unnecessary Female) was used as a type, almost a stock character by turns ridiculous and/or tragic. As Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei have noted, 'male writers were particularly vitriolic about the U.F.' citing

Rudyard Kipling's *Mary Postgate* (1915), Dorothy in George Orwell's *The Clergyman's Daughter* and, in the most extreme example of spinster-phobia, William Platt's *The Passionate Spinster: A Psychological Novel* (1932).<sup>31</sup> Brian Moore's 1955 novel, *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, published as Spark was finishing *The Comforters* provides an interesting contrast to Spark's middle-aged, boarding house spinsters. Though Moore's characterisation of Hearne is wholly sympathetic, the reader is left in no doubt that this is an intensely tragic, even cautionary tale. In the 1987 film adaptation of the book, Maggie Smith's BAFTA winning portrayal of the self-pitying, raging, alcoholic Judith Hearne could not be further removed from her 1969 role as Miss Jean Brodie. While Judith Hearne nurses her regret and heartbreak in Dublin, Jean Brodie is, for the most part, having a fabulous time striding around Edinburgh with 'her girls'. The US film critic Pauline Kael wrote that in playing Judith Hearne, '[Maggie] Smith becomes the essence of spinster – she makes you feel the ghastliness of knowing you're a figure of fun'.<sup>32</sup> Her experience is awful, to be avoided at all costs. The description of Hearne's surroundings in the novel convey her isolation and desperation, the sense of living life on the fringes. In Alan Hollinghurst's *The Sparsholt Affair*, the author writes of the distinctive smell of burnt dust from two-bar fire in a London lodging house. We can almost smell the burning dust emanating from the pages of Judith Hearne. Spark's women lodgers and landladies are far from dusty: independent, idiosyncratic, with rich, complex inner lives, their circumstances are rarely cause for regret or self-pity, even when they are beset with challenges and obstacles: scheming blackmailers, plagiarists, sexual predators. If anything, they are regarded by other characters as rather too capable, too independent or too smart. As such, Spark comments on the way unmarried women, especially those of a certain age, are perceived. On one hand they are seen as having few responsibilities, and therefore available to attend to others' needs on demand

(much to their ire), and on the other, their resolute and cheerful single-ness confounds those around them. Why do Jean Brodie and Nancy Hawkins turn down proposals? Why are they not as amenable as they appear? How can they resist? What else would they be doing? Why are they so obstinate? Spark's self-determined spinsters are fearless. Less lonely and frustrated than their married counterparts, they lead active social lives and make friends easily. Friendship, in fact, is treated as a crucial aspect of life: 'there they were', writes Fleur in *Loitering with Intent*, 'like your winter coat and your meagre luggage'.<sup>33</sup> These platonic friendships could be seen as what Armistead Maupin has deemed 'logical' rather than 'biological' family structures formed between colleagues, neighbours, lodgers and landladies.

Back in the boarding house, the slender means of Spark's single women are clearly manifested through their humble accommodation. Far from constraining or diminishing them, these specific sites offer the characters an opportunity to show a range of admirable traits: fortitude, resilience, resourcefulness, solidarity, imagination. The archetypal Sparkian single woman is surely the advice-giving, high standard-holding, utterly self-assured Nancy Hawkins, who is unfazed by losing one job after another (she has three editorial posts in the space of a very short novel) and simply has nice breaks in between jobs, safe in the knowledge that something else will come along through her network of friends and associates.

Howell Hodgkins writes that much of the comedy of Spark comes through the fact that spinsters, usually the object of pity, neglect or scorn, take pride of place as never before, and become the subject.<sup>34</sup> Their character or narrator's focus on apparently trivial domestic details works both to celebrate individual female perception and to satirize

traditionally grand literary ideals. These women are aware when other characters are being condescending towards them, they have an all-too-conscious sense of their being potential objects of ridicule and they strive to validate their own subjectivity in the face of prejudice and dismissal. Nancy Hawkins' refusal to adjourn to the next room with the 'ladies' at a formal dinner party is both a *faux pas* and a statement of intent: she will not be categorised and she will not follow convention. When Spark herself was referred to as a 'dear little thing' (by John Bayley), she wrote to Doris Lessing about the encounter, saying 'I hated that 'dear little thing' – f\*\*k him'.<sup>35</sup> In *The Comforters*, Louisa Jepp's crimes are hidden in plain sight – who would suspect an old lady, living alone and devoted to home-baking, of diamond smuggling? And in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, 'it is not the sexpot but the girl with piggy eyes who becomes the mistress'.<sup>36</sup> Spark delights in confounding the expectations of her readers and characters. The message is surely: underestimate me at your peril.

In 1998, Muriel Spark, writing in the short-lived, US interiors magazine *Nest*, published an essay titled 'Bedsits I Have Known', in which she presented a taxonomy of bedsits and boarding houses, describing the characteristics of each type: from low-rent to high-end, from all-over 'autumn tints' to light grey curtains and Regency-look wallpaper and upwards to beige wall-to-wall with bright cushions and a sideboard-cum-drinks cabinet. Through her account of the upwardly sliding scale of the kinds of furnished rooms one might inhabit, or indeed has inhabited, Spark also recounts her own exponentially improving financial fortunes, culminating, before she left the US for a permanent home in Italy, in the luxurious rooms rented in the Beaux-Arts Hotel between 1964-68 on the East River in New York. These were decorated to her own choosing in mustard coloured wall-to-wall carpeting



with turquoise upholstery, white walls, and curtains white with large yellow flowers. 'Maybe this sounds awful', she writes, 'but it looked a dream'.<sup>37</sup> The New York years were a far cry from Camberwell though it is telling that she kept on her rooms in London for a number of years after her move to New York, as though the bedsit represented a form of escape and productive solitude. After she became famous, she would often check into retreats or hospitals because of illness but also because she wanted to be alone 'and gather her thoughts'.<sup>38</sup>

In Kate Macdonald's essay *The Use of London Lodgings in Middlebrow Fiction 1900-1930s*, she writes of lodgings as 'having the capacity to test character', that the socially low setting of the lodging house allowed characters to respond to the circumstances that had brought them there.<sup>39</sup> The bedsit and boarding house was inhabited not only by single, heterosexual women, of course, but by many other people otherwise marginalised, excluded or otherwise on the fringes of 'conventional' family life. Spark's boarding houses include immigrants, homosexuals, bachelors, refugees, criminals, those with religious callings – housemates and bedfellows of diverse backgrounds and nationalities who are brought together to create a vibrant cast of characters. In these spaces, the spinster is less an 'odd woman', and becomes part of community made up of co-habiting 'foreigners' and others. In *Bed-Sits I Have Known*, while taking care to emphasise that she 'hadn't visited a bedsit in years', Spark nevertheless wrote with warmth of the 'large part of my life, starting from war-time England' that 'was taken up with bed-sitting rooms in London'.<sup>40</sup> On the whole, her reminiscences do not speak of loneliness or isolation but of an intensely productive period of creativity which led to great success. Bedsit and boarding house living held a similar appeal for some of Spark's fellow writers in early to mid-century London,

including her friend and contemporary Doris Lessing. Reflecting on a slightly earlier period, Dodie Smith's autobiographies also include long, detailed descriptions of her time living in rented rooms in London. Smith's early plays were written under a male pseudonym while living in lodgings and working at Heal and Sons furniture store. Her nostalgic account of this period evokes 'a lost world where young career women had a different sort of independence'.<sup>41</sup> Smith's contemporary, the playwright and novelist Elizabeth MacKintosh, who wrote plays under the pen name Gordon Daviot and novels as Josephine Tey, also wrote positively about lodgings before she was forced to return to Inverness to live with and care for her elderly father. Many of MacKintosh's spinster characters were similar to Spark's in their defiance of convention and their enthusiasm for life beyond romantic relationships (1946's *The Franchise Affair*; 1947's *Miss Pym Disposes*) while her 1934 play, *The Laughing Woman*, is 'an attempt to understand why a woman would give up her creative dreams for a man'.<sup>42</sup> In MacKintosh's early career as a PE teacher, during which time she also began to write, she travelled widely and enjoyed the freedom of boarding house life. Her biographer, Jennifer Thomson, notes that while 'life in lodgings lacked privacy, but housework duties were smaller as there was only the one room to look after, and meals were often provided'.<sup>43</sup> MacKintosh herself wrote: 'I've an encyclopaedic experience of digs, boarding houses, hotels, and other people's homes. But [...] I've never made a home in my life [...]. Never wanted to, of course – I could have had a flat when I was working, but I always preferred the appalling ugliness of rooms to doing anything for myself'.<sup>44</sup>

For women, and for Spark in particular, the removal of domestic drudgery and the absence of family responsibilities allowed for a focus on other occupations. Miss Brodie is only allowed to be a teacher, Gerry Carruthers notes, *because* of her spinsterhood in a

period where women teachers were expected or required (by the 'marriage bar') to relinquish their career when they married.<sup>45</sup> According to Barbara Pym's Mildred Lathbury, even the burden of keeping three people in toilet paper seemed rather a large one.<sup>46</sup> In catered accommodation – boarding rather than lodging houses – where occupants took meals together before retreating to their individual rooms, the experience sounds remarkably similar to a long-term writing residency. It is surely no accident that, like their author, many of Spark's women are writers or work in publishing: Caroline Rose, Fleur Talbot, Mrs Hawkins, Jane in *The Girls of Slender Means*. Patrick Hamilton's Enid Roach (in *The Slaves of Solitude*) similarly works for a publishing firm in London, commuting from the Rosamund Tea Rooms guest house each day. *Loitering with Intent*, as Spark acknowledged, was a semi-autobiographical novel which drew on her experiences as woman living alone in post-war London. Like *A Far Cry From Kensington*, it is written in the first person, framed as a memoir and features Fleur Talbot, a celebrated writer, reminiscing on a period during which she lived in a bedsit and worked on her first novel, supporting herself through paid employment for the Autographical Association. The parallels to Spark's period as a jobbing writer in the late 1940s – for a jewellery trade magazine, *Argentor*, political magazine *European Affairs* and then as General Secretary for The Poetry Society and Editor of *The Poetry Review* – are abundantly clear.

The bedsit in Spark's novels, then, represents artistic freedom for women, allowing for a lifestyle which provides both solitude to focus on work and companionship through living communally. Jenny Turner has highlighted that in *Loitering with Intent's* opening pages we are presented with details of what she calls 'a mid-century room of one's own'<sup>47</sup>, complete with a gas ring operated by pennies. The detailed description of the Fleur Talbot's

bedsit room in the novel is remarkably similar to the account of Spark's own room, described in Martin Stannard's biography. In *Loitering*, we are told that the room contained 'a gas ring for cooking, a bed for sitting and sleeping on, an orange box for food stores and plates, a table for eating and writing on, a wash basin for washing at, two chairs for sitting on or (as on the present occasion) hanging washing on, a corner cupboard for clothes, walls to hold shelves of books and a floor on which one stepped over more books, set in piles'.<sup>48</sup> When Fleur's friend, Maisie Young, comes to visit she is described as 'ignorant about penniless realities'. Clearly horrified, she repeatedly remarks on the rooms 'compactness': 'Compact, compact, it's really...it's really...I didn't know they had this sort of thing in Kensington [...] how do you keep everything so clean, yourself?'.<sup>49</sup> Writing of Spark's own rooms, Stannard writes: 'the table was a folding card table; the bed, single: everything temporary, functional, conventical in its austerity – and dominated by books, books, books'.<sup>50</sup> Even the makeshift orange box cupboard in *Loitering's* Vicarage Gate appears again in Spark's own account of how her rooms were furnished. And yet, in spite of the relatively low status of these lodgings, and the clear sense of austerity and making do, we are reminded by their inhabitants that this in no way cause for self-pity – quite the opposite. Rather, we are told repeatedly in *Loitering with Intent* 'how wonderful it feels to be an artist and a woman in the twentieth century'.<sup>51</sup>

As I have noted, Spark's life at 13 Baldwin Crescent was a remarkably productive period – she finished *The Comforters* and went on to complete *Robinson*, *Memento Mori*, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* and *The Bachelors* in quick succession over two years. The combination of solitude (as opposed to loneliness) with companionship and routine, provided Spark with the time and space to write. The particularities of living communally

also provided subject matter, as Spark has noted: 'With the usual essentials and furnishings came the landlady or the housekeeper. She was part of the equipment; she had to be taken on, too. This included her life-story. I imagine it still does.'<sup>52</sup> Spark goes on to describe the typical decor and furnishings of a bedsit, and the related codes of behaviour imposed by the landlady. 'The room was furnished with a single, or if you were lucky, a three-quarter bed which you expected never to share with anyone whomsoever'. 'That settled', she wrote, 'the next requirement was regular payment of rent, with the accent on regular. A day or two's delay made the landlady nervous, and a request for a week's delay would result in a visible hardening of all her arteries, every one. If you were a woman you were expected to give a sympathetic ear to the landlady's story.'<sup>53</sup> Ever the economist, Spark calculated that 'this worked out at about fifteen minutes a day but if you were, for instance, a writer anxious to get on with your job, it seemed like an hour. On the other hand, as a novelist I found that these narrations were often very rewarding'.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps this kind of communal living came more easily to the Edinburgh-born, tenement-raised Spark than it may have for others in inter- and postwar Britain. Scottish tenement living often comes with the common phenomenon of the 'close matriarch'. Like the landlady of a well-run pub, and often an older woman living alone, the close matriarch takes it upon herself to 'keep order' amongst the tenants and maintain the standards of common areas. To get 'caught in the close' by such a figure on your way in or out of the building is to know you must allow for the expected fifteen minutes to an hour. But as Spark notes, if we don't resist it, the 'burden of daily chatter'<sup>55</sup> can be rewarding. For Spark, this kind of participant observation, living cheek-by-jowl with people thrown together by circumstance, yielded rich rewards in terms of subject matter for her books. The odd juxtapositions, idiosyncratic dialogue, strange couplings and – for a writer so spare and economical – the rich attention to domestic detail in Spark's novels

surely find their source in lived experience. In *A Far Cry From Kensington*, the tenants seek out the company of their Irish landlady, Milly, and hold long conversations over the kitchen table. Similarly, Spark has written with particular fondness of her own London landlady, Tiny Lazzari noting that, 'on the whole landladies preferred their tenants to be out working all day. It took them time to get used to people working at home, but if you were seriously hard at it they become, in time, extremely supportive [...] Hers had been the best bed-sitter any hard-up working author could wish for. When I left it was a real wrench.'<sup>56</sup> Martin Stannard has reminded us that when Spark became famous, Evelyn Waugh advised her to get a better address than her attic rooms in Camberwell. Good advice, she conceded, and promptly ignored.<sup>57</sup>

The contingent relationship between the material conditions of a writer's life and her ability to think and write regularly for uninterrupted periods of time is still regarded as one of the most significant requirements for women who want to write. In her acknowledgements for the novel *Milkman*, the novelist Anna Burns thanked a housing charity, Lewes District Churches Homelink, for their support in 'helping her find quiet accommodation in order to write'.<sup>58</sup> Following the novel's award of the 2018 Man Booker Prize, Burns continued to acknowledge the housing charity and Newhaven food bank as factors in her success. In doing so, she reinforced the need for writers – particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and particularly women – to secure accommodation and domestic arrangements that allow for writing time. Asked of her plans for her prize money, Burns replied that she would clear her debts and spend the remainder on rent. In *The Girls of Slender Means*, Jane is also on a constant quest to find peace and quiet to concentrate on her 'brain-work'.<sup>59</sup> Recently, some writers have contested Woolf's

argument about the conditions necessary for women who write. As Anne Aronson has noted, Ursula Le Guin's *The Fisherwoman's Daughter* cites a number of women who have written novels while surrounded by family, at the dining table, in the kitchen (Margaret Oliphant; Harriet Beecher Stowe). Based on these examples, Le Guin disavows Woolf's insistence on the need for a child-free space or 'even, speaking strictly on the evidence, a room of her own' (though she concedes that such a room 'is an amazing help').<sup>60</sup> According to Le Guin, a pencil and paper are the only requirements a woman needs to write and think creatively. However, as Aronson has highlighted, it is the 'issue of economic and social privilege that puts Le Guin's argument for only 'a pencil and some paper' in question'<sup>61</sup>, just as Woolf's counterargument assumed women should 'have' a room and an income, with no proposals for how this might be achieved. Aronson claims that 'Le Guin makes her case from a position of considerable privilege. Her account of her own history as a writer [...] suggests that financial constraints are irrelevant to her personal struggles with writing [...] Le Guin also has the advantages of a supportive spouse.'<sup>62</sup> She adds that 'Le Guin suggests that the material conditions for writing are "immaterial", so to speak, as long as the writer has the conviction to follow her own meanings and perspectives, as long as she refuses to be the angel in the house. Such a viewpoint suggests that assuming responsibility and control of one's writing is an act that is somehow separate from the material conditions of writing'.<sup>63</sup>

For Aronson, 'Le Guin can say that a pencil and paper are enough for a woman to write because her work space probably isn't shoved between a fruit bowl and a football uniform on the kitchen table. She can say that a pencil and paper are enough because her husband doesn't demand clean socks at the moment she is composing a sentence with the potential to be something quite beautiful'.<sup>64</sup> According to Alan Taylor, being a writer 'was of

paramount importance' to Spark and 'demanded a degree of sacrifice not required in other professions. To achieve her aim she had to distance herself from demands on her time and emotions.' Taylor claims that 'Spark was not in the least domesticated. From an early age, she told me, her mother had instilled in her the idea that if you don't know how to do something – ironing, washing dishes, vacuuming – you'll probably not be asked to do it. Spark took this advice to heart and never wavered in her avoidance of such chores.'<sup>65</sup> As Paul Delany has noted, both Spark and Doris Lessing accepted the bedsit as a suitable place for those unwilling or unable to become housekeepers: 'it was a question not just of avoiding 'female' domestic obligations, but also of being free to do something else, to sit and smoke and contemplate the blank page.'<sup>66</sup>

Spark 'made a career of escaping when she thinks something is going to stop her writing'.<sup>67</sup> We can assume that for Spark, a room – or the solitude a room provided – was as crucial to her writing as it was for her literary characters. In a trailer for her online writing masterclass, Joyce Carol Oates, an admirer of Spark, has similarly identified quiet and solitude as crucial to a writer's success, claiming that 'the great enemy of writing isn't your own lack of talent, it's being interrupted by other people.' For Oates, 'constant interruptions are the destruction of the imagination'.<sup>68</sup> Spark's friend and contemporary Doris Lessing also noted that 'writers, and particularly female writers, have to fight for the conditions they need to work.'<sup>69</sup> Spark's spinsters, and Spark herself, assumed that paid employment was part of life, a necessity that would allow for a lifestyle and occupation they chose. Like their author, most of her women characters regard relationships (with partners or children) as secondary concerns in their life's narrative: 'to Spark, everything comes second to the story: sons, lovers, health and welfare'.<sup>70</sup> Mary Taylor, an early feminist activist and close friend of



Charlotte Bronte, published numerous essays between 1865-1870 to persuade her readers that to be truly free, women should earn their own living. She believed that to marry for money was degrading and had criticised Charlotte Bronte for subscribing to the idea that women were bound in duty to sacrifice themselves for others. Spark's life and work appear to follow all of Taylor's edicts.<sup>71</sup>

Muriel Spark is not, of course, the only writer to have foregrounded the lives of unmarried women, or to have presented them as admirable, interesting and vibrant. We laugh with, rather than at, Spark's spinsters, who perhaps have their literary ancestry in George Gissing's Rhoda Nunn, from his 1893 novel *The Odd Women* or Sylvia Townsend Warner's 1926 *Lolly Willowes*. Similarly robust, confident and complex spinsters can be found in the works of Winifred Holtby, Vita Sackville-West, Stevie Smith, Elaine Dundy, Barbara Comyns, Doris Lessing, Sarah Dunant, Margaret Atwood and many others. In contrast to the typical portrayal of the spinster in culture, Spark's spinsters are characterised by their modernity – they are Londoners: urban, autonomous, sophisticated, intellectual, decisive. They go wherever they please and see whomever they choose. They do not live with extended family as 'maiden aunts', neither are they 'spinsters of the parish', arranging flowers in the village church and assisting the curate. In her book *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Novel*, Laura Doan writes that as a historical subject and literary representation the character of the spinster 'is defined by absence; she lacks a primary relationship with a man to fulfil her role as wife and mother. Other available kinship roles achieve only marginal importance and cannot compensate for the inadequacy of her single status.'<sup>72</sup> We might see that in this perceived lack, the spinster's lack of 'other' results in her being othered. But equally, spinsterhood allows

women to define themselves. In 1903, Arnold Bennett found that reviewers ‘were staggered by my hardihood in offering a woman of forty as a subject of serious interest to the public’.<sup>73</sup> Over fifty years later, in *Quartet in Autumn*, Barbara Pym’s Letty writes ‘might the experience of ‘not having’ be regarded as something with its own validity?’<sup>74</sup> It is perhaps disappointing, then, to read an entry in Pym’s diary which initially appears to comply with literary convention in overlooking the spinster as an active subject: ‘the position of the unmarried woman – unless, of course, she is somebody’s mistress, is of no interest whatsoever to the reader of modern fiction’. In the next line, she adds a note: ‘the beginning of a novel?’<sup>75</sup> For Muriel Spark, writing furiously in her lodging rooms in the late 1950s, the position of the unmarried woman was the beginning of some of her most celebrated and memorable works, works which brought spinsters off the shelf.

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