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‘ ... you married “for better or worse”, didn’t you? You are having a spot of “worse”’: Marital advice from the ‘Ask Lou Lockheart’ column in the *New Zealand woman's weekly*, 1950

Abstract:

In the second half of the 20th century, New Zealand attitudes to what was normal and appropriate in married life underwent the considerable changes associated particularly with the late 1960s and the 1970s. This study examines what Gramsci calls ‘common sense’ (1971) about marriage over the single year of 1950, as found in the ‘agony aunt’ columns of the widely-read *New Zealand woman's weekly* in an attempt to identify and describe attitudes prior to those changes. It reveals a world where marriage was expected of everyone, and correspondents’ problems ranged from their spouses’ irritating habits to regular beatings. The agony aunt ‘Lou Lockheart’'s blunt, no-nonsense advice reflects a world where, despite women’s choices being limited, they were expected to have the fortitude and dignity to either conquer or endure their hardships. Close analysis of two letters shows incipient rebellions amongst housewives against what Walby terms the ‘private patriarchy’ (1990) within their marriages. These accounts of conflict about who should do the housework suggest the strict gender roles of the 1950s, although largely supported in public discourses such as this column, were privately contested at the time.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Creative writing – Magazines – Women’s magazines – Divorce – Marital advice – Agony aunt – New Zealand – 1950s

In 1950, New Zealand had a rate of divorce which, in hindsight, looks very low.¹ At the time I write this, at least twice as many individuals divorce as did in 1950, and many more separate after living with partners in de facto relationships. Separation and divorce appear to have become widely accepted and considered 'for the best' when the couple are unhappy – if still unfortunate because of the distress we assume the process entails. The following study investigates New Zealand attitudes to marital disharmony and divorce at the beginning of the 1950s, as part of a larger study which will track the extent and nature of the changes we have experienced since then. It is an examination of a world only the oldest of us remembers, the world of our parents and grandparents, a world the English-speaking West tends to romanticise as stable, harmonious and safe (Coontz 1992). It looks for evidence of that world in a commonly consumed text of the day, one in which the voices of readers are heard alongside the authoritative voices of the authors. The agony aunt column, 'Ask Lou Lockheart', in the *New Zealand woman's weekly* issues of 1950 provided troubled readers with personal advice, and provides us with a partial view of how marital troubles were framed in those (now) long-ago days.

The first women's magazine appeared in the United Kingdom in 1693 (White 1970), and was a harbinger of one of the most widely read genres in English-speaking countries. Their potential to influence women has been much discussed, notably during the second wave of feminism. Betty Friedan's foundational text, *The feminine mystique* (1963), framed the magazines of the 1950s as propaganda for the ideology that masculinity should be privileged over femininity, as a result of which women were indoctrinated to accept only a narrow range of roles, most of them relatively powerless. Sylvia Walby dubbed male-dominated households 'private patriarchy' (Holmes 2009: 62) and this was Friedan's primary concern. Friedan described American middle class women's response to their restricted roles as a 'problem with no name': their desperation about being 'trapped in a squirrel cage' (1963: 25). New Zealand women too experienced the frustrations of their restrictive roles (Pool, Dharmalingam & Sceats 2007) and had a champion who popularised the term 'suburban neurosis' here. In the same decade as *The feminine mystique* appeared, Dr. Fraser McDonald, a media-friendly psychiatrist and the medical superintendent at Kingseat, one of New Zealand's large psychiatric hospitals, was concerned about the number of suburban wives with mental illness, particularly depression (Kedgley 2004). Like Friedan, he saw this as symptomatic of wider societal ills. Friedan, a journalist herself, blamed in particular American women's magazines for their role in perpetuating unjust limitations on women's roles in society.

Other feminist texts followed, including Germaine Greer's *The female eunuch*, which specifically positioned itself as 'part of the second feminist wave' (1970: 11) and challenged women to rebel against their own and others' characterisation of them as passive, sexless and powerless. Kate Millett's *Sexual politics* (1977) introduced the term 'patriarchy' in a stinging attack on traditional attitudes to women's sexuality. One of the outcomes of the 'women's liberation' movement here was a magazine for feminist readers like me. *Broadsheet* (1972–1997) provided us with an alternative to older, mainstream magazines like the *New Zealand woman's weekly*, which was seen as anodyne at best, and an organ of the patriarchy at worst, by those of us swept up by

the possibility that to achieve more autonomy in our own lives, we need merely take it.

Despite its significant role in the ideas which inspired the feminist movement, *The feminine mystique* was critiqued by later studies more interested in social history than polemic. They looked again at 1950s magazines and found that Friedan's selection of texts had been highly tendentious. The magazines from the middle decades of the 20th century contained a range of sometimes conflicting narratives which approved of more than just domestic roles for women. Meyerowitz showed how they wrote admiringly of individual women's achievements, for example in public office, or displays of stoicism in the face of ill health or other personal difficulties (1993). Subsequently there was a gradual decline in magazine items supporting traditional gender roles (Demarest & Garner 1992) and increasing emphasis on individuals and their rights to happiness (Moskowitz 1996). An analysis of 'agony aunt' columns in post war Italy showed that even in a country where the law still prohibited divorce, women were increasingly coming to expect not just social approval, but personal happiness, from marriage (Morris 2007). Wives were seen to be positioned not only as responsible for the health and welfare of their husbands and children (Barnett 2006; Kirkman 2001; Roy 2008) but also, crucially, for the happiness of their marriages (Celello 2009). Nevertheless, part of Friedan's legacy was the establishment of women's magazines as a useful source of information about our past.

Maintaining a marriage was a very important task in the New Zealand of 1950, as the consequences of separation were likely to be severe. If a divorce was contested, the law required fault to be determined in court (Department of Statistics 1950), and the welfare grant available to mothers who had been abandoned by their husbands – provided they had first pursued them unsuccessfully through the courts for maintenance payments – was not yet available to divorced women (Goodger 1998). There was also the risk of public humiliation, as the details of divorce cases could be reported in the newspaper. Women's magazines, with their articles by 'experts' about marriage and their 'agony aunt' columns, positioned themselves as advisors to women needing help to keep their marriages not only intact but, in the best traditions of romantic fiction, also happy. The effect was that, although women's magazines 'clearly did not advocate feminist solutions or have feminist intentions, they contributed to a discourse of discontent and a new standard of psychological happiness' (Moskowitz 1996: 91).

In New Zealand, Helen May's doctoral thesis came to similar conclusions to Friedan's about the impact of our local women's magazine:

the *N.Z. Woman's Weekly* ran articles encouraging women: to work for war and rehabilitation during the 1940s; to stay at home in the 1950s; to work part time in the 1960s; and by the 1970s and 1980s to work full time in the name of equality. These shifts are part of a wider network of political, economic and social relationships which shape the options of individuals (1988: 39).

And, although women's magazines consumed in New Zealand have been investigated for their depictions of other matters, including menopause (Shoebridge & Steed 1999) and pregnancy (Hine 2012), there has been no study to confirm their attitudes to

divorce in a more detailed and specific way than this brief mention by May 25 years ago.

By 1950, *The New Zealand woman's weekly* had been published and widely consumed since 1932, and was a well-established part of many households.² Like other women's magazines, it provided templates for domestic life (Beetham 2006), and included with the patterns for home-made garments and the recipes for meals was advice about family relationships. Although clearly intended for women, the *Weekly* was likely to be read by all members of the family, who also contributed to the letters pages, comic incidents of family life entitled 'Over the teacups' and, my main focus, the regular column which dealt with personal relationships: the 'problem page', as it used to be called, or the 'agony aunt column', as it is called now. In 1950, the *Weekly's* column was called 'Ask Lou Lockheart', and its invitation read:

Have You a Love Problem? If you have any affairs of the heart on which you need advice, just drop a line to Lou Lockheart, c/o N.Z. Woman's Weekly, Box 1409 Auckland C.1, and she will help you to solve them in her weekly talk.

In order to examine prevailing attitudes to troubled marriages and divorce at that time, I collected all the 'Ask Lou Lockheart' columns for 1950, which included responses to 231 letters.³ The bulk of the letters, 197, concerned romance and courtship, sex and sex education, problems between parents and teenagers, and one case of marrying across cultures. The 34 which focussed exclusively on marital problems were concerned with issues such as infidelity, interference from in-laws, jealousy and re-marriage after divorce. Four of those letters were from male correspondents (about 12 per cent of the total). After a largely thematic analysis – which also looked at the linguistic elements of metaphors and euphemisms – I formed three broad categories. The first and most obvious was causes of discontent, which ranged from annoyance at a husband's love for his dog (18 May: 30) to infidelity (for example, 5 January: 50) and assault (15 June: 34). The second category was generalisations about the roles of wives and husbands, and the third was the recurring themes of advice. Below, I will first focus on the agony aunt herself as revealed in the columns, and then on two letters and an article for what they reveal about attitudes to one source of marital disharmony in particular – the question of whether husbands should contribute to the housework.

To the reader, Lou Lockheart was an expert in relationships, a guide and an advisor, but the name itself is likely to have been a pseudonym and her actual identity is a mystery. If the column was indeed written by a single author, there is no evidence for her (or his) expertise, and the sketches at the head of each column changed from week to week, apparently randomly. The actual author, like the correspondents, remains both invisible and anonymous, and there could potentially have been many authors, men or women. I therefore use the pronoun 'she' for the persona Lou Lockheart because that is conventional, while bearing in mind that the author or authors may not have even been female. Nevertheless, the voice is distinctive, and the tone consistent through all the responses, suggesting a single author. It is often brusque and no-nonsense. Even when dealing with what is clearly a case of sickening bullying and violence from a husband, Lou Lockheart admonishes the young wife to 'certainly see

a lawyer – or call the police if your husband ill-treats you physically. ... Now, do something soon, and I feel the greatest sympathy for you' (15 June: 34). There is a suggestion of the then authoritative English 'middle class' accent: 'Personally, I always think (though we doubtless all feel jealous at times) that displaying the emotion of jealousy is narrow and ill-bred' (8 June: 30), and she is frequently blunt: 'I think you had better wake up, "Sleepy Eyes". He is not in love with you. He has no intention of getting a divorce ... Make your motto "No poaching"' (23 November: 34). It is a confident voice of authority, but not necessarily an unsympathetic one. It assumes the right to reprimand, particularly the young, but acknowledges that emotions such as jealousy, though to be suppressed because undignified, are understandable.

Lou Lockheart could be considered a personification of conventional wisdom in matters of the heart. She is the anonymous voice of the times, and potentially all the more influential for being disembodied and presumably unnamed. Her voice is what Antonio Gramsci would perhaps call the voice of 'common sense' (1971). Gramsci was interested in those rarely articulated, taken-for-granted understandings about what is acceptable in any given society, as he believed any radical political change had to be founded on beliefs and attitudes which, although multifarious, contradictory and subject to change, were already deeply embedded in the community and often unquestioned (Watkins 2011). Watkins takes the concept a step beyond Gramsci's political context into the field of economics, and uses it to show how challenging people's 'common sense' beliefs about the inevitability of the current global economic system could be just as revolutionary as changing their beliefs about political systems. Similarly, Crehan argues for the usefulness of Gramsci's concept in the more distant field of anthropology and concludes it could be more fruitful than the more widely accepted reliance on the theory of 'habitus' from Bourdieu, with its focus on interpersonal exchanges, because Gramsci allows for the possibility of transformation (2011).

Gramsci himself argues that 'common sense', 'even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential' (Hoare & Smith 1971: 419) but it, nevertheless means that injustices and inequities may be accepted as given and not contested by subordinated groups. Since the author of 'Ask Lou Lockheart' was, like everyone else, embedded in the society she belonged to, and since it was her task to provide socially acceptable advice to the lovelorn, then she can be considered one of the voices of accepted wisdom on the matters at hand – in Gramsci's terms, the 'hegemonic' voice which maintains the interests of the powerful. She could be trusted to advise on what was socially correct behaviour in the correspondent's circumstances, and, crucially, not to give advice which would be socially unacceptable – that is, outside the bounds of contemporary 'common sense'. However, as we shall see, within her column too, if inadvertently, may be detected the 'seeds of transformation' identified by Crehan in Gramsci's useful concept.

Although a traditionalist, Lou Lockheart is not opposed to divorce in certain circumstances. She advises separation when the husband is very violent, but also advises remaining together when she regards the causes of a wife's unhappiness to be trivial. Another columnist goes even further. In the 12 January 1950 edition, 'The

marriage myth' by 'Paterfamilias' (another pseudonym) says divorce may indeed be a better outcome than staying together when a marriage is past repair, an idea which he contrasts with 'all the tut-tuttings about the present breakdown of marriage as an institution'. He describes the impact on children of being raised in homes which were 'outwardly stable but inwardly miserable', and says they 'would have been better off if the home had been broken up' (12 January: 11). In these two columns at least, divorce is seen as appropriate under certain conditions. If the 'expert' voices in the local women's magazine are accepting of divorce, then it indicates that divorce was becoming an acceptable outcome of serious marital disharmony, despite the ongoing disapproval of some sectors of society. In this way, the *Weekly* in 1950 can be seen as positioning itself as at the forefront of changing attitudes. It is noteworthy that Lou Lockheart sees herself and the world as modern, keeping up with changing conventions, and increasingly informal: 'this is an ... age when we don't bother much with titles, and we are all Tom, Dick and Harry to each other' (7 December: 34). It would appear that New Zealanders' attitudes towards divorce were already changing more than a decade before the 1960s and 1970s, the period conventionally seen as revolutionary in family matters.

In the period I write this – the second decade of the 21st century – the two decades following the end of the World War II are frequently idealised in the West as a period of fruitfulness, prosperity and peace, particularly within the family (Coontz 1992; May 1988). American film and television family comedies of the time, such as *Father knows best* are perhaps closest to what we mean when we refer to 'the traditional family'; it is a suburban, white, nuclear family, where father works and mows the lawn, mother cooks and cleans, and children have both the freedom and the disciplined nurturing they need to grow up well and strong. It is a romantic view, where love conquers all troubles, and all endings are happy. Despite her recommendation of divorce in extreme circumstances, Lou Lockheart chastises unhappy wives for worrying about issues she regards as not serious enough to require separation, including what she calls the 'perpetual hazard' of infidelity (5 January: 50), and also expresses an underlying unease with what she sees as a high rate of social change away from tradition and formality. Where from a distance we may see stability, up close the harbingers of social change were not going unnoticed. In American women's magazines too, 'countless articles on achieving marital harmony spoke to widespread disharmony' (Walker 2000: xvii).

To counter what she considers frivolous complaints, Lou Lockheart places a high value on self-respect, restraint and personal dignity, as well as a married person's duty to their family and to society. This is close to Kant's conception of duty, with its obligations to obey both actual and moral laws which are assumed to be absolute (Blackburn 1994). Cancian dates the idea of duty in marriage to the 19th century, when the wife's duty was deemed to be providing comfort and affection in the private world of the home, and the husband's providing guidance, security and the means for that comfort in the public world of work (1987). However, in many of these letters Lou Lockheart is addressing situations where husbands are not doing their duty. A woman whose husband is an incorrigible gambler and impoverishing the household (22 June: 34), another whose husband is repeatedly unfaithful (29 June: 34), yet

another whose husband constantly criticises her (7 September: 34), are all encouraged to refrain from having verbal battles about these matters. While ignoring the financial realities for these women – that mothers without paid employment were rendered relatively powerless when their men failed in their duty of provision and care – Lou Lockheart recommends not that the husbands reform, but that the wives adjust their own behaviour. She says they should remain calm, confident that they are keeping their own marriage vows, even if he is not keeping his, and thus, by implication, remain on higher moral ground. Her advice is that ‘Bickering will not do. His is a cowardly sort of criticism, and show it up as such. He will think the more of you if you do so – but keep your control and dignity’ (7 September: 34). The result of doing one’s duty is self-respect, and therefore a dignified demeanour, which should inspire respect from others.

To resolve the conflicts, she encourages the wives to behave towards their husbands with the firmness that can be gained from their sense of moral rectitude, and to play on his weaknesses, especially his vanity. To the wife whose husband is rejecting of her child from a previous relationship, she advises ‘build up the child to look forward to seeing “daddy”’. Men are 90 per cent vanity and that would go a long way to making him take to the child’ (9 March: 30). To the woman irritated by her husband’s devotion to reading Westerns and reluctance to fix things around the home, she recommends various indirect strategies to change his mind, from paying a tradesman to do the jobs, to asking him questions about his work, even if she’s not interested: ‘It takes two to make a conversation on stage or off. It looks as though you will have to act stooge pro tem’ (13 April: 30). To the young wife who misses her husband’s courting behaviours, she repeats:

Men are vain. Without laying it on too thick, you might admire the way he carves the joint, fixed the dripping tap, a fuse and so on. You might also buy him a flashy bow tie now and then and pat his pretty chin when he has had a shave (27 April: 30).

She appears to believe that if women directly confront their husbands, they will not only lose the argument, but will come out of it having also lost their self-respect, and perhaps his respect as well. The implication is that men are fallible creatures to be managed intelligently, and can often be wooed into compliance with the wife’s wishes, but never argued into it. In short, men can be manipulated but not confronted.

The lens of Gramsci is again a useful way of looking at this, as he saw the potential of ‘common sense’ to reinforce the hegemonic interests of the powerful over the relatively powerless. He was interested in the distribution of power within society, and although *Prison notebooks* (1971) contains few direct references to a power disparity between women and men, he does comment that:

until women can attain not only a genuine independence in relation to men but also a new way of conceiving themselves and their role in sexual relations, the sexual question will remain full of unhealthy characteristics (Gramsci qtd. in Hoare & Smith 1971: 296).

It was clear to him that there was such a disparity, and it of course remains a foundational concept in feminism, as discussed for example in Connell (1987), Holmes (2009) and Walby (1986). It was also clear to Gramsci that to combat their

relative powerlessness, women themselves had to see it for what it was – to question their ‘common sense’ assumptions. In these columns, Lou Lockheart appears to support – or at least to accept – the prevailing gender inequity; at no point does she question its justice. Instead, her responses to women’s letters in 1950 take for granted that a husband will have more power in the household than a wife, and that his power is derived from customary understandings of the two roles, including his provision of money to run the household. This ‘common sense’ assumption of male prerogative – made by most women as well as most men – is fundamental to Lou Lockheart’s advice to wives whose husbands they believe are mistreating them.

As we have seen, the consequences of leaving a marriage, particularly if the woman had dependent children, were potentially dire; unless she had other sources of support, there was a high risk of sliding into relative destitution, and little chance of gaining employment that paid anywhere near her husband’s wage. This gave most husbands an unbeatable hand when it came to conflicting interests. The Lou Lockheart advice, although undoubtedly pragmatic (and potentially effective) at the time, in itself speaks to a widespread power differential between the roles of husband and wife, man and woman. Her advice unflatteringly characterises husbands as potentially unreasonable, stubborn and intransigent, but with weaknesses the wife can exploit: explicitly their vanity, but also, by implication, their sexuality. This is not the marriage of supportive equals we aim for today, but one in which the less powerful partner must manipulate her husband and exploit his weaknesses if she is to get what she wants from him.

Lou Lockheart herself has the power to control how the letters are framed. According to Entman:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (1991: 52).

A close reading of the columns reveals how she commands the point of view to be taken towards any correspondent’s problem, a position which then lends itself to a relatively simple solution. One way she controls the discourse is by either fully or partially summarising letters, rather than printing them in full, and by giving them headings which point the magazine reader to her preferred interpretation. In other cases, she includes nothing at all of the letter, only her response, leaving the reader to guess at what the original letter was about. For example, a December entry with the heading ‘Two girls’ responds to two 15 year olds who had written in about the same problem, but whose letters were not published: ‘both of you acted in an amazingly impulsive, if not absurdly supine manner. You have not been taught to behave properly and your parents must try and mend your lives for you’ (7 December: 34). By pointing out their immaturity through the heading, failing to print anything at all from their letters, then reprimanding them, she is positioning the reader to dismiss their situation as a result of being stereotypically silly girls, whose parents should have raised them better. If she is the voice of ‘common sense’ about love, then it is a voice that remains closed to debate, or to alternative ways to narrate the story which

might lead to different conclusions (for example that some men, including married men, will take advantage of vulnerable, under-age girls).

Udansky studied changing attitudes to single parent families over time, and found that, while motherhood is valorised, housework is not, and that this difference persists (2009). A source of disharmony in many marriages was (and remains) the question of how the essential (but little valued) work of keeping the home clean and tidy should be allocated. To examine more closely 'common sense' attitudes to marital disharmony, I selected two contrasting letters which discuss this point. The author of the first letter had asked for it not to be printed in the original, perhaps wary of being identified, but her attempt to control its reception is easily routed by Lou Lockheart, whose paraphrase gives clear directions to readers about how she intends them to interpret the case:

A Woman's Rights

'Mary' asks me not to quote her letter. She pleads for her 'rights'. Her home is her fortress, but her husband refuses to be her slave.

Yes, of course, Mary, you have a right to choose your own friends – but his, too? A house keeper and a nurse's salary? If you demand them you put yourself in the position of an employee. When a woman demands 'rights' she forfeits privileges (26 October: 34).

This letter goes to the heart of the column's representation of the rights and duties of marriage, and its ideologies about the roles of wives and husbands. 'Mary' seems to be seeking support for two assertions: that she should be able to exclude some of her husband's friends from her home, and that her labour in the household should have a monetary value. Coontz calls this sort of argument 'a bitter kind of bookkeeping' which comes at the end of marriage when a woman 'may be shocked to find how little monetary worth is accorded the work she has done in the guise of gift giving' (1992: 63). The contemporary normative push towards professionalising housework which was supposed to increase its status (Celello 2009; Connell 1987; Walker 2000) seems to have passed Mary by. Even today, hers would be a very radical suggestion, and it seems to be an attempt to gain power within the relationship, framed by Mary in terms of 'human rights'. That the headline is 'A woman's rights' both reiterates this and, in the context of the piece, ridicules it. Nevertheless, her claims make Mary something of a proto-feminist, and an exemplar of latent attitudes towards the economy of marriage which would become much more widespread in the 1970s and 1980s.

Lou Lockheart's response is telling in the vitriol of her disapproval: she characterises a husband who accedes to these 'demands' as a 'slave' and such a home as a 'fortress' in which all is controlled by the mistress, Mary. A man's home should be his castle alone, not hers, apparently. She describes Mary's move to gain more authority as a demand for complete subjugation of the husband – and the exaggeration is evidence of the strength of her objections. Mary's proposition appears to violate the agony aunt's fundamental beliefs about the proper distribution of power within a household. She is suggesting, as the better alternative, that in a potentially hostile (public) world, it is a wife's 'privilege' to live in the safety of private life and that it is not her 'right' to demand money for the services she contributes to the household. She is seeing it as

much preferable to have her husband support Mary as a matter of honour and duty: there is more dignity in the wife generously giving herself to the role, than in demanding payment for it. However, if Mary has no money of her own, something she may have no control over, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that she is a form of indentured servant herself. Lou Lockheart's response is a rationalisation of cultural norms about the division of labour (Connell 1987), and she is reframing the situation to disguise its inequality, and so pacify women readers such as Mary. On this issue of housework, it is clear that Lou Lockheart is articulating cultural 'common sense' in her assumption that housework should be done by the wife alone, and that it is a form of payment for her keep. Both Lou Lockheart and Mary are functioning within a society whose 'philosophy', in Gramsci's terms, has deeply entrenched assumptions about the relationship between interpersonal power and money. Mary is trying to gain more autonomy by asserting her 'rights' to payment, and Lou Lockheart is addressing this claim with ridicule and outrage, rather than logic. Given her role as 'expert', this puts an end to any discussion of the matter, and silences Mary.

Mary's viewpoint was not without its supporters, however. Walker notes: 'Indeed, precisely in the contradictory messages that the magazines frequently conveyed is it possible to see the domestic as a contested and negotiated concept rather than a prescribed and stable one' (2000: vii). This can be seen in another *New Zealand woman's weekly* article from May 1950, entitled '... And woman struggles on' by Penny Wise: 'The only unpaid workers in this so civilised State, are the mothers ... Many of the savage races whom whites dismiss as of no consequence, treat their women better' (4 May: 10). She goes on to lament the lowly status and lack of remuneration for housewives. Its racist language aside, the piece appears to support Mary and contrasts with Lou Lockheart's attitude in her response. Lou Lockheart may have been the voice of common sense understandings about marriage, but those like Mary and Penny Wise were challenging her assumptions within the same publication and within the same year.

Another letter, also paraphrased, which considers the power relationships between husband and wife in terms of the division of household labour is entitled 'Self-esteem' (25 May: 30). In contrast to Mary, this correspondent gets Lou Lockheart's enthusiastic approval. 'Elizabeth' is concerned that her friends criticise her for not getting her husband to help with 'the chores usually considered a woman's work'. On the contrary, Lou Lockheart praises her for her 'competence and generosity' and criticises the friends as 'incompetent drones'. This is a rather startling exchange, in the context of other letters and the conventions of the genre, not for what it says directly (which strongly reinforces that housework is women's work) but for what it reveals indirectly. If there has been a discussion between women friends that one of their number should be getting her husband to help with the housework, perhaps even ordinary women's acceptance of the status quo was in doubt. And when Lou Lockheart uses the words 'usually considered woman's work', she is assuming that there are other people who do not consider it the sole preserve of women, and do think men should participate. Here, buried in the implications of a text expressing 'common sense', are the seeds of change identified by Gramsci. By the last quarter of the century, the question of whether husbands should help with the cleaning and cooking

was widely discussed, and, being open to debate, was far less deeply entrenched in conventional wisdom than it had been in 1950. As Germaine Greer noted in *The female eunuch*, 'perhaps women have never really believed the account of themselves which they were forced to accept from psychologists, religious leaders, women's magazines and men' (1970: 13).

In 1950, New Zealanders had sent their young men to fight overseas twice since 1914, and had endured a severe economic depression. They were not to know the following half-century would be, by contrast, largely peaceful and increasingly prosperous for most families. The signs were there, however. Servicemen had mostly returned from overseas, there was full employment and a welfare state to support the needy. Increasingly, women could expect more – more in terms of material comfort, and more in terms of getting their desires for personal happiness met. These letters and responses speak to an incipient rise in many women's hopes for more autonomy within their marriages, and more happiness in their closest relationships. In the tug of war between duty and happiness, duty was becoming a concept in decline in the national 'philosophy', and greater happiness was beginning to seem increasingly possible. The scene was being set for more women to be able to seek that happiness by leaving their marriages.

Endnotes

1. 633 divorces were finalised in New Zealand in 1950, when the population was between 1.8 and 1.9 million, affecting 3,266 individuals, less than 0.2 per cent of the whole population (New Zealand Official Year Book 1950). In December 2012, the population was estimated at 4,435,700, and divorce affected 17,570 individuals or 0.39 per cent of the population – making the rate of divorce in 2012 nearly twice what it was in 1950. This does not take into account the many more de facto relationships which existed in 2012, a number of which must also have ended in separation.
2. Sales and readership figures are unavailable for 1950, but in 1992 the *New Zealand woman's weekly* had an estimated readership of 875,000, which was approximately 25 per cent of the population. Until the arrival of Australian covers in the early 1990s, it was the only local women's magazine, and would have been significantly cheaper than any magazines imported from Great Britain or the USA.
3. All of the columns from 1950, and letters from those columns, that are cited in the body of this article are identified by day, month and page number. The full list of columns is given in Works cited.

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