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**THE VETERAN, HIS WIFE AND THEIR MOTHERS:
PRESCRIPTIONS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL REHABILITATION
AFTER WORLD WAR II**

Rebecca Jo Plant¹

In early 1947, the wife of a World War II veteran sat down at a typewriter and pounded out her frustration and disappointment. The former war wives of America, she believed, had been “let down” by husbands who, upon their return, had failed to measure up as strong household heads and capable providers. To make matters worse, she and other young women had to contend with experts who dispensed maddeningly contradictory advice:

As one of the millions of war wives I am told repeatedly that my husband has just been through a terrible ordeal [...] that he is nervous and confused and it will take time and infinite patience and understanding from me to help him return to normal. Then again I am told as a wife and mother that our service men suffered from a new disease called “Momism” and it is up to we mothers to teach our children to be independent—to help them stand on their own feet and think for themselves. Those two attitudes contradict each other.²

This woman landed upon two key themes that any peruser of the popular press would likely have encountered in the mid-1940s: first, the claim that pathological mothering had contributed to the high incidence of neuropsychiatric casualties among American troops; and second, the notion that returning veterans would need supportive mates to help them regain their emotional equilibrium. Whereas the former chastised women for imperiling the mental health of American men by nurturing too much, the latter urged women to help restore the mental health of American men by nurturing more.

Yet these messages may not have been as contradictory as they first appeared, for they targeted two different generations of women—middle-aged mothers and young wives—perceived as having quite different roles to play in relation to the returning veteran. In advice literature and popular culture, veterans’ attachments to their mothers tended to be depicted as neurotic and regressive, whereas their attachments to loyal young girlfriends and wives tended to be portrayed as healthy and mature.³ From a contemporary perspective, this might seem unremarkable, but it had not always been so. During both the Civil War and World

¹ I would like to thank Sonya Michel, Diederik Oostdijk, Frances Clarke, Rachel Klein, Alisa Plant and Rand Steiger for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² This woman was writing to the popular writer Philip Wylie. Mrs. Theodore Blake to Philip Wylie, February 19, 1947, Folder 1, Box 239, Philip Wylie Papers, Firestone Library, Princeton, New Jersey.

³ This essay does not explore another important prototype, the materialistic and promiscuous girlfriend or wife who betrayed the serviceman or veteran.

War I, the soldier's emotional bond with his mother had been lauded even above that which he shared with his wife, and his homecoming had typically been imagined as an emotional mother-son reunion.⁴ In contrast, after World War II, experts and cultural producers rarely depicted middle-aged mothers as anything but problematic for veterans and the medical practitioners who treated them.

Scholars who have analyzed the gender dynamics of the immediate postwar period have tended to overlook such generational distinctions, for they have focused primarily on images of and prescriptive literature directed toward young women. The most widely-cited article on advice literature concerning veteran readjustment, historian Susan Hartmann's "Prescriptions for Penelope," seeks to explain why the war, despite its disruptive influence on gender roles, did not fundamentally undermine the prevailing gender order. Concentrating on messages directed toward girlfriends and wives, Hartmann shows how experts pressured young women to reassure traditionally feminine roles, placing their husbands' needs above their own.⁵ Likewise, in her study of depictions of physically disabled veterans in postwar cinema, Sonya Michel shows how the young sweetheart or wife played the central role in facilitating the veteran's recovery. According to Michel, Hollywood's heroic helpmates deftly balanced both maternal and sexual characteristics: their maternal ministrations, when "tempered with sexuality, allowing for masculine recovery and resexualization," enabled veterans to come to terms with their injuries and move beyond their wartime experiences.⁶

⁴ During the Civil War, popular literature generally represented younger women as more "astringent than nurturing," as Alice Fahs argues in "The Feminized Civil War: Gender, Northern Popular Literature, and the Memory of the War, 1861-1900," *Journal of American History* 85 (March 1999): 1468. See also her book *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North and South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). Susan Zeiger argues that, during World War I, "the middle-aged American 'Mom' was the predominant image of womanhood" in "'She Didn't Raise Her Boy To Be a Slacker': Motherhood, Conscription, and the Culture of the First World War," *Feminist Studies* 22 (Spring 1996): 6-39.

⁵ Susan M. Hartmann, "Prescriptions for Penelope: Literature on Women's Obligations to Returning World War II Veterans," *Women's Studies* 5.3 (1978): 223-39. Robert B. Townsend has observed that scholars, following Hartmann's line of analysis, have focused on the messages directed to young wives, despite the fact that "[t]he family depicted in the literature [on returning veterans] is much larger than the simple husband-wife relationship." "'Home Fears Burning': Manhood, Family, and the Returning GI Problem," paper in the author's possession.

⁶ Sonya Michel, "Danger on the Home Front: Motherhood, Sexuality, and Disabled Veterans in American Postwar Films," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3 (July 1992): 109-28. For other works that discuss representations of World War II veterans, see: James I. Deutsch, "Coming Home from 'The Good War': World War II Veterans as Depicted in American Film and Fiction" (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 1991); David A. Gerber, "Heroes and Misfits: The Troubled Social Reintegration of Disabled Veterans in *The Best Years of Our Lives*," *American Quarterly* 46 (December 1994): 545-74; and Timothy Shuker-Haines, "Home Is the Hunter: Representations of Returning World War II Veterans and the Reconstruction of Masculinity, 1944-1951" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1994).

These works demonstrate how postwar experts and popular culture consistently cast young women in a therapeutic role, charging them with responsibility for veterans' physical and psychological care. But they do not explore how this privileging of the heterosexual union tended to be linked to a devaluing and pathologizing of veteran's relationship with his mother. The notion that middle-class mothers threatened American manhood was by no means new; since the late nineteenth century, commentators and psychological experts had fretted that overbearing mothers and uninvolved fathers produced boys who were effeminate or worse, homosexual.⁷ But in the 1940s, the attacks on mothers reached unprecedented heights in terms of frequency and vitriol. In his inflammatory 1942 bestseller, *Generation of Vipers*, the popular writer Philip Wylie decried "momism" as a uniquely American pathology and a threat to national security.⁸ A few years later, the psychiatrist Edward Strecker appropriated Wylie's neologism in a speech that blamed American mothers for the shockingly high rates of neuropsychiatric disorders among American draftees and servicemen. According to Strecker, who elaborated his ideas in *The Saturday Evening Post* and a bestselling book, American mothers had failed to raise "mature" sons who could shoulder their duties as democratic citizens.⁹

The discussions about returning veterans occurred within this context of pervasive anti-maternalism and alarm over revelations concerning the number of neuropsychiatric casualties during the war.¹⁰ Just as experts blamed mothers for the psychological problems of servicemen, so they perceived them as potential obstacles to veterans' readjustment. According to prescriptive literature and popular dramatizations, the veteran's best hope for recovery resided in a girlfriend or wife

⁷ Julia Grant, "A 'Real Boy' and Not a Sissy: Gender, Childhood, and Masculinity, 1890-1940," *Journal of Social History* 37.4 (Summer 2004): 829-51.

⁸ Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1942). For more extensive discussions of Wylie's momism critique, see: Mari Jo Buhle, *Feminism and Its Discontents: A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Rebecca Jo Plant, "The Repeal of Mother Love: Momism and Reconstruction of Motherhood in Philip Wylie's America" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2001); and Jennifer Terry, "'Momism' and the Making of Treasonous Homosexuals," in *"Bad" Mother: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 1998): 169-90.

⁹ Edward A. Strecker, "Psychiatry Speaks to Democracy," Menas Gregory Memorial Lecture, *Mental Hygiene* 29 (October 1945): 591-605; "What's Wrong with American Mothers?" *Saturday Evening Post* 21 (October 26, 1946): 14-15, 83-104; *Their Mothers' Sons: A Psychiatrist Examines an American Problem* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1946).

¹⁰ For much of the war, authorities censored information concerning neuropsychiatric casualties. Roughly 500,000 servicemen were discharged on neuropsychiatric grounds, accounting for an astonishing 49 percent of all medical discharges. Moreover, Selective Service examiners rejected approximately 1,846,000 men, or 12 percent of all recruits, from induction into the Armed Service on neuropsychiatric grounds. Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 88-99.

who could steer the veteran toward greater self-reliance, if necessary by acting as a buffer between mother and son. When she herself needed guidance, the wife turned not to an older, more experienced woman, but to the veteran's psychiatrist or doctor, who embodied the paternal authority deemed so sorely lacking in the typical American home.¹¹ Together, the wife and the doctor formed a therapeutic team, supplanting the sentimental mother who had tended to the veteran in previous eras. To them fell the duty of restoring men who had suffered not only the trauma of war, but also the effects of distorted familial relationships.

Even before victory had been declared, an array of books and articles began to appear designed to help veterans and their families make the transition to a new postwar reality. While such works varied widely, nearly all portrayed readjustment in psychological terms, as an emotionally fraught process that could result in serious difficulties if mishandled.¹² The effect of this literature, as historian David Gerber has noted, was "to cast doubt on the mental stability of every demobilized man [...]. Every veteran was a potential 'mental case,' even if he showed no symptoms."¹³ Numerous writers, including veterans themselves, denounced advice literature on the "veteran problem," as did the columnist William Lynch when he lambasted "those half-baked popularizers of psychology who are responsible for the hundreds of articles and lectures that would have us believe that every veteran will return hateful, maladjusted and resentful."¹⁴ Yet the therapeutic framework proved so pervasive that even those who mocked the experts seemed unable to conceptualize the issue in alternative ways.¹⁵

According to most commentators, successful readjustment entailed several crucial steps: leaving the security of the hospital or the parental home; finding a job or enrolling in school; and assuming or reassuming the role of husband and father. Experts argued that married veterans in particular needed to attain emotional and financial independence from their parents. According to a professor at New York University, the less young couples depended on their elders, the better their chances for a successful marriage: "A husband must have an adequate job. Then the wife

¹¹ A cartoon expressed the message succinctly. Beneath an image of a young woman, surrounded by four tea-sipping matrons, ran the caption: "They're no substitute for the doctor." Alexander G. Dumas and Grace Keen, *A Psychiatric Primer for the Veteran's Family and Friends* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1945), 143.

¹² General Omar Bradley warned that, when the community failed to assist the veteran, "it has created a condition that can breed a psychoneurotic." "Bradley Demands Aid for Veterans," *New York Times* (November 2, 1945): 34.

¹³ Gerber, "Heroes and Misfits," 549.

¹⁴ William Lynch, "Strictly Personal: Home Fears Burning," *Saturday Review of Literature* 28 (April 28, 1945): 8.

¹⁵ Interestingly, in nations that had suffered much greater devastation during World War II, such as the Soviet Union and East and West Germany, discussions of veterans' dilemmas assumed very different forms. See Frank Biess, *Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming), and Anna Krylova, "'Healers of Wounded Souls': The Crisis of Private Life in Soviet Literature, 1944-1946," *Journal of Modern History* 73 (June 2001): 307-31.

must have a home for which she is responsible. Above all, parents should not subsidize their children. The further geographically removed the young and old generations are, the better.”¹⁶ Similarly, Charles Brown, chief of the New York Mental Hygiene Service, decried the acute housing shortage—which forced many young couples to reside at least temporarily with parents—as “one of the biggest factors in making many veterans mentally sick.”¹⁷ Even when the decision to move in with parents seemed freely chosen, experts took exception. The psychiatrist George Pratt, for example, warned of two types of cases: those in which the young war wife had moved back home “for the duration” and felt “inwardly inadequate to assume independent living away from [...] her mother;” and those in which the married veteran, “who [...] is somewhat immature and dependent on his mother,” wanted to reside with his parents. According to Pratt, young couples needed to live on their own.¹⁸

In case histories and dramatizations, the veteran’s decision to leave his parents, especially his mother, often figured as an critical step on his road to recovery. An article about psychodramatic theater, a new technique being employed with returning neuropsychiatric casualties, related the struggles of a serviceman named “Bill” to break free from his mother. “How can I get loose from mamma?” he asked, enacting his dilemma before an audience of patients and hospital staff. “She wants me to stay home forever when I get out of the Navy [...] I’m afraid to hurt her, but I’ve got a job waiting for me in Texas that I want to take.” When Bill then anticipated his mother’s protests and attempted to respond, his stance came across as unconvincing, prompting a fellow patient to remind him, “There’s not much place for a mamma’s boy in the Navy or in Texas.” After he had repeated the same scene over the course of three months, Bill finally acquired the psychological strength to defy his mother and accept the job—a decision that coincided with his discharge from the hospital.¹⁹

Other works detailed the difficulties of young veterans who returned to their parental homes. “In her joy at having Sonny back, Mother frequently overdoes the welcoming and coddling,” the psychologist Ethel Ginsburg warned, “and all too often Father feels it necessary to play the heavy-handed parent in an attempt to reestablish his authority.”²⁰ The popular magazine *Look* chastised one such mother in an article that discussed the case of a nineteen-year-old veteran suffering from “a case of emotional immaturity.” “Jimmy” clashed repeatedly with his mother upon his return; he “accused her of attempting to run his life” and “even once tore her hand from his shoulder.” But instead of holding Jimmy accountable for his behavior, the writer blamed his hovering mother, arguing that she had failed to allow her son the latitude that he needed: “A wise mother would have known that her son was

¹⁶ Jere Daniel, “The Whys of War Divorces,” *New York Times Magazine* (February 3, 1946): 48.

¹⁷ “Kilroy Was Here,” *Time* 48 (August 19, 1946): 68.

¹⁸ George K. Pratt, *Soldier to Civilian: Problems of Readjustment* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1944), 181.

¹⁹ Arline Britton Boucher, “They Learn To Live Again,” *Saturday Evening Post* 216 (May 27, 1944): 105.

²⁰ Ethel L. Ginsburg, “Veteran into Civilian: The Process of Readjustment,” *Mental Hygiene*, 24.1 (January 1945): 5-16.

experiencing a crucial transition. She would have been affectionate without smothering him. She would have offered advice only when he sought it.”²¹

In cases involving serious injury or illness, experts tended to be on guard for maternal misbehavior that might undermine the efforts of health care practitioners. *A Psychiatric Primer for the Veteran's Family and Friends* described the histrionic behavior of one “distraught mother” whose hospital visits proved disruptive: “When she came to visit her son, she walked on tiptoe, shushed everybody in sight, peered nervously around the door before entering the room, and [...] cautioned and questioned until the doctor began to wonder whether it wasn't she who should be in the hospital instead of her son.”²² The psychiatrist George Pratt related a similar dynamic involving a veteran who had suffered severe facial disfigurement. After working with a psychiatrist to conquer “his oversensitiveness and morbid preoccupation” with his scars, he returned home, only to contend with his family's “artificial Pollyanna-like treatment.”

It annoyed him beyond words to have Mother tiptoe about the house, shushing everyone who talked loudly, to have her fuss over him and to see the tears of silent pity course down her cheeks as she begged him to ‘rest’ on the couch in the living room [...] He strove manfully to stifle his exasperation when his mother insisted on his reciting over and over again the intimate details of his wounding; how it happened; when it happened; did it hurt much; did he lose quantities of blood [...] until her well-meaning interrogations into these personal matters hurt worse than the surgeon's probing for embedded mortar fragments.²³

Arthur's mother erred in numerous ways, according to Pratt: she failed to contain her own grief over his injury; she attempted to nurture him in inappropriate ways; and, worst of all, she violated his privacy by insisting that he revisit the scene of the trauma. When she assumed the psychiatrist's role—urging her son to recall and articulate his traumatic experiences—the result was neither catharsis nor greater insight, but regression and loss of initiative. The mother, it seemed, could not absorb the “intimate details” of wartime trauma without absorbing the man himself.

Such cases seemed to imply that the veteran's mother should follow a highly constrained course of action—a view articulated by the sociologist Willard Waller in the *Ladies' Home Journal* article, “What You Can Do to Help the Returning Veteran.” While allowing that veterans might need maternal “warmth and tenderness,” Waller urged mothers to be circumspect. If her son wanted to talk, the mother should be available to listen; if he preferred to remain silent, she should not pry. Yet Waller deemed even this modest role appropriate only for mothers whose sons remained unmarried. The mother of a married veteran, he counseled, faced “a much more complex situation” that demanded “great self-restraint”: “There is only one bit of advice that one can honestly give to such a mother, and that is: Let the young people alone! [...] Every generation has the right to make its own mistakes

²¹ “The Mental Road Back from War,” *Look* 10 (January 2, 1946): 28.

²² Dumas and Keen, *A Psychiatric Primer for the Veteran's Family and Friends*, 210.

²³ Pratt, *Soldier to Civilian*, 3-6.

[...] You will meddle but to mar. Let the young people alone!” As Waller’s emphatic refrain made clear, mothers of married veterans could do little if anything to assist their sons, except in the negative sense of making themselves scarce.²⁴

Waller prescribed a far more active role for wives, or at least those capable of “systematic intellectual work.” He urged the veteran’s wife to engage in “serious study of the veteran and his psychology” by forming reading groups to discuss the literature of World War I, as well as articles and manuals on veteran psychology. She should then scrutinize her husband “in the light of what she has learned,” striving “to understand his particular case.” Waller in essence urged the wife to assume the stance of a therapist, regarding her husband with the requisite detachment to assess his “case” and determine a proper course of action. Yet he was quick to add that the well-informed wife would “realize when she needs professional help” and take the lead in convincing her husband to seek mental health care. In short, whereas Waller found it necessary to restrain or even banish servicemen’s mothers during the delicate phase of readjustment, he believed that young wives, backed by mental health care specialists, could act in a therapeutic capacity.²⁵

Other writers had less direct ways of suggesting that the mother and the wife had strikingly different, even antithetical, roles to play in promoting veteran rehabilitation. The authors of *A Psychiatric Primer for the Veteran’s Family and Friends* made the point by imagining the distinctive ways in which each might fail the veteran. Assuring readers that nearly all men discharged for psychiatric reasons would be able to resume productive lives, they warned that “if the mother takes over her son’s life for him, stifling his initiative and his urge to get well, explaining to all comers that ‘Joe has to be careful now that the war’s got his nerves’; if the wife is fearful, lacking confidence in her husband’s ability to head his household again; [...] then the man’s chances for recovery will be poor.”²⁶ In other words, whereas the veteran’s mother might dominate and infantilize him, his wife might undermine his self-assurance by doubting his abilities. Here again, women received a bifurcated message: mothers should restrain their maternal impulses to encourage independence, while wives should respond to the veteran’s need for support and ego fortification.

Popular women’s magazines offered not only directives for guiding veterans back to health, but also individual portraits of young wives who managed to live up to the ideal. One article, written by a “returned flier” discharged as psychoneurotic, described how his wife helped him to regain his composure in civilian life. “Sometimes when I hesitated [...] my wife would offer a suggestion or change the subject until I arrived at great control. Or when my nerves would tighten and my speech get jumbled or my hands jump in public, she’d say something to calm me. Everything she did was aimed at restoring my self-confidence and making me feel comfortable and relaxed.”²⁷ Similarly, a lengthy feature on Ed Savickas, a victim of “combat fatigue,” praised his level-headed wife Stella: “The best thing

²⁴ Willard Waller, “What You Can Do To Help the Returning Veteran,” *Ladies’ Home Journal* 62 (February 1945): 94.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 95-6.

²⁶ Dumas and Keen, *A Psychiatric Primer for the Veteran’s Family and Friends*, 210.

²⁷ “Give Us a Break!” *Woman’s Home Companion* 71 (October 1944): 88.

[...] for a returned cases of combat fatigue, of course, would be to supply each guy with a wife like Stella, aware that merely loving your guy isn't enough to help him get squared round."²⁸ The feature also included a report by the attending psychiatrist that detailed the various "rules" that Stella had adopted in dealing with her troubled husband. These wives did not indiscriminately shower their husbands with love; their balmy influence stemmed from their ability to perceive and discreetly meet their husbands' fluctuating needs.

In less didactic mediums, such as radio soap operas and films, depictions of returning veterans tended to be darker and more melodramatic. Still, popular dramatizations often featured characters that resonated with the archetypes that surfaced in advice literature. As Timothy Shuker-Haines has noted, a number of radio soap operas included an "evil mother" character who deviously attempted to undermine her son's relationship with his loyal fiancé or wife. In "The Right to Happiness," for example, a mother plotted to disrupt the marriage of her son, who had returned home determined to be a better husband to his wife. "If they all keep on believing I'm ailing," she ruminated, "I'll have Dwight's sympathy as well as his love – and I can make him see she's not good enough for him."²⁹ Hollywood films rarely demonized veterans' mothers to this extent; in cinema, the focus tended to be on veteran's girlfriend or wife, with the mother relegated to a minor role at best.³⁰ But numerous films portrayed the veteran and his young helpmate overcoming parental failings by turning to one another.

In the somber 1949 film *Not Wanted*, for example, a veteran with a prosthetic leg encounters a pregnant, unmarried girl who eventually gives up her child for adoption. Early in the film, the girl's mother is portrayed as a frightful nag and household drudge; in fact, the audience is given to understand that the mother, by creating such an unpleasant home environment, is responsible for her daughter's moral lapse. The veteran has no family at all. *Not Wanted* endorses marriage as the only solution for these two lost souls. At the film's end, they literally save one another: the girl's grief over her child is so unbearable that she rushes to a bridge to commit suicide. The veteran attempts to protect her from her self-destructive impulses, but his physical disability prevents him, and he winds up prostrate on the bridge, pounding his fists in frustration. It is this raw display of neediness—more than his evident love—that finally makes her stop, turn toward him, and choose life. She will nurture him; he will take the place of her relinquished baby. Yet the final image of the film, in which she cradles him on the bridge, suggests how desperate and wounded both individuals are, and how isolated they are from other sources of

²⁸ The feature included a photograph of a multigenerational dinner scene with Ed, his wife Stella, their young daughter and Stella's mother. But Ed appears grim and distracted, and the caption informs readers: "The Savickas tried living with Stella's mother when Ed was discharged a year ago, but he was too edgy." J. C. Furnas, "Meet Ed Savickas: A Victim of Combat Fatigue," *Ladies' Home Journal* 62 (February 1945): 142.

²⁹ Shuker-Haines, "Home Is the Hunter," 205.

³⁰ The most comprehensive discussion of cinematic and literary representations of World War II veterans is Deutsch's "Coming Home from 'The Good War.'" For the most recent account of World War II veterans in film and literature, see Christina S. Jarvis, *The Male Body at War: American Masculinity during World War II* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004), chap. 3.

emotional support. *Not Wanted* thus holds out marriage as the answer, but it does so in strikingly unromantic terms, with the promise of sexual gratification downplayed in favor of safety and emotional security.³¹

The 1945 film *The Enchanted Cottage* also depicts a healing union between an emotionally wounded young woman and a physically wounded veteran. An Air Corps pilot returns home with a lame arm and a disfigured face, only to have his fiancé recoil in horror when confronted with his injuries. Seeking refuge, he flees to a remote cottage that they had intended to rent after their marriage. Here he meets a homely young woman, Laura, who provides him with constant reassurance and physical care. Ultimately, the two marry, but both suspect that the marriage is a farce: he fears that he has selfishly saddled her with a broken man, whereas she fears that he can never truly love her, nor know how much she loves him. The conflict is resolved through a miraculous transformation on their wedding night, in a none-too-subtle allusion to the powers of the nuptial bed: she becomes beautiful, and he is made whole. Their newfound happiness, however, is shattered when the veteran's mother and stepfather arrive for a visit. The young couple happily welcome them, only to realize by the mother's insensitive reactions that their transformation is in fact illusory. (When the camera portrays them from one another's perspective, they appear whole and beautiful, but when portrayed from the mother's perspective, they appear as before.) *The Enchanted Cottage* thus drives home quite conventional themes: love can heal; beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Yet at the same time, the film alludes to the fragility of the marital union, for it can blossom only in a remote location, and meddling relatives threaten to break the spell that binds the two in mutual happiness.³²

An almost mystical characterization of marriage also appears in a very different sort of film, the 1945 John Huston documentary *Let There Be Light*. Produced by the Army Signal Corps to educate the public about the problem of neuropsychiatric casualties, the film follows a group of men from the time they are admitted to Mason General Hospital in New York—trembling, stuttering, disoriented and depressed—until they are released six weeks later, apparently freed of debilitating symptoms.³³ Although the film ends on a decidedly upbeat note, the

³¹ *Not Wanted* (produced by Collier Young; directed by Elmer Clifton; released by Emerald Productions, July 1949). Although Clifton is credited as the director, Ida Lupino took over for him after he suffered a heart attack.

³² *The Enchanted Cottage* (produced by Jack J. Gross; directed by John Cromwell; released by RKO Radio Pictures, April 1945). *The Enchanted Cottage* was a remake of a 1924 film by the same name. In the earlier version, the veteran's overbearing sister drives him to take refuge in the cottage, whereas in the 1945 version, it is significantly his domineering mother whom he seeks to elude. Thanks to James Deutsch for calling my attention to the earlier version.

³³ *Let There Be Light* (directed by John Huston; produced by the U.S. Army Signal Corps Pictorial Service in 1945; released 1980). For the film's history, see: Gary Edgerton, "Revisiting the Recordings of Wars Past: Remembering the Documentary Trilogy of John Huston," *Reflections in a Male Eye: John Huston and the American Experience*, ed. Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1993), 33-61, and Greg Garrett, "Muffling the Bell of Liberty: Censorship and the

Army withheld it from public viewing until 1981, apparently discomfited by Huston's raw, unflinching portrayal of war trauma. Indeed, the images of traumatized veterans in *Let There Be Light* are utterly unlike those that appear in Hollywood productions. But interestingly, the film departs from its tone of sober realism when invoking the restorative power of marriage. In the penultimate scene, the camera pans over a group therapy session as the psychiatrist dispenses final words of wisdom. "How does a man find happiness?" he queries, before proceeding to answer his question: by finding a mate. "Not all of the learning, and all the books is half as valuable in getting over nervousness as to find someone you feel that you can learn to feel safe with," he counsels. Through music, lighting, Christian references and imagery, *Let There Be Light* presents marriage as a kind of redemption or salvation. While the psychiatrists may have patched up the men and prepared them to return to civilian society, it remained to their wives or future wives to ensure that their recovery would prove lasting.

It is always difficult to know how much significance to accord to popular and prescriptive texts when attempting to assess trends in social life. Many veterans scorned literature that depicted them as a social problem, and female readers could be highly skeptical of expert advice and idealized portraits of wifedom and motherhood. Still, though impossible to measure, the discussion surrounding returning veterans had important consequences. By lauding the therapeutic capabilities of girlfriends and wives, it helped to spur the trend toward youthful marriage and inward-looking nuclear families that characterized the postwar era.³⁴ And by reinforcing the critique of American "moms" as overly involved in their children's lives, it condoned attitudes and behavior toward mothers ranging from the dismissive to the contemptuous. Wherever young couples looked—in popular magazines, Hollywood films or professional literature—they found their desires for autonomy validated, and their antagonism toward their parents, especially their mothers, legitimized.

Initially, a mutual disdain for middle-aged mothers could fuel a couple's sense of independence and solidarity. But such a stance could not easily be sustained over time, especially if the couple had children themselves. Consider the account of another veteran's wife, who, like the writer quoted at this essay's outset, also wrote to Philip Wylie in 1947. As she explained in her letter, her husband had spent more than three years in the Army, and his denunciations of "mom" made Wylie's own acerbic critique "seem almost kindly":

For he fully believes that most of the disgraceful acts of the American soldier were due to too much coddling and not enough discipline from dear old you know who, that the outrageous

World War II Documentary," *Journal the American Studies Association of Texas* 22 (1991): 61-73.

³⁴ Studies of the postwar familial ethos include: Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), and Jessica Weiss, *To Have and To Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

behavior of our occupation troops was traceable to mom, that she preferred to feed, feed [*sic*] her own ego rather than instill the true attributes of manliness in her son. And the Veterans psychiatric wards are full of the boys who couldn't take it thanks to Mom's depleting influence.

My son is only four months old, but I intend, instead of using the more orthodox books on child rearing, to keep 'Generation of Vipers' close at hand. And my husband has a very successful method of controlling me. He merely says, 'Don't be a mom.'³⁵

One can only wonder how this couple dealt with the difficulties of readjustment, and whether or not the specter of wartime horrors haunted their relationship. But what seems clear is that this woman allied herself with her husband and male commentators like Wylie, shunning any identification with the women of her mother's generation. Yet though she pledged to avoid the dangers of momism—going so far as to seek approval from Wylie himself—she still did not escape her husband's censure. In prescriptive literature and popular culture, expressions of anti-maternalism generally targeted middle-aged mothers, but in the realm of private life and interpersonal relations, such neat typecasting did not pertain.

It is a sad letter to read, and it suggests something of the impossibility of the wife's situation. Like all those cast in a therapeutic role, the good wife had to submerge her own emotions and accept the hostility directed toward her, however remote its actual origins. But unlike an actual therapist, she enjoyed neither the protection afforded by a controlled setting, nor the rewards of professional prestige and financial compensation. The culture may have elevated veterans' wives at the expense of middle-aged mothers, idealizing the former and scapegoating the latter, but in the aftermath of World War II, neither generation of women emerged victorious.

³⁵ Charlotte Petty Sewall to Wylie, January 31, 1947, Folder 3, Box 237, Philip Wylie Papers.