

Women's Midlife and the Crisis of Writing:

Karin Michaelis's *The Dangerous Age* and Rose Macaulay's *Dangerous Ages*

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ABSTRACT

Long out of print, but particularly timely, are two remarkably similar novels, *The Dangerous Age* by the Danish writer Karin Michaelis, published in 1910, and *Dangerous Ages*, published in 1921 by Rose Macaulay. Both novels are about the psychological pain women suffer at midlife, but as these novels show, the crisis transcends a particular moment, experience and symptomatology by resonating throughout women's lives. Although it appeared ten years earlier than the Macaulay novel, Michaelis's work is the more radical. Elsie Lindtner's diary and letters become an aggressive response to women's condition, while Macaulay reveals women's anxiety attending the self-revelation inherent in writing.

RÉSUMÉ

Deux romans remarquablement semblables, dont la publication est épuisée depuis longtemps, sont tout à fait à l'ordre du jour: *The Dangerous Age* de la danoise Karin Michaelis, publié en 1910, et *Dangerous Ages* de Rose Macaulay, publié en 1921. Tous deux font état du malaise psychologique dont souffrent les femmes dans la force de l'âge mais, comme le montrent ces romans, la crise dépasse le moment particulier, l'expérience et la symptomatologie: elle a des répercussions, en fait, durant la vie entière de la femme. Bien qu'il ait été publié dix ans avant celui de Macaulay, le roman de Michaelis est le plus radical des deux. Le journal intime et les lettres d'Elsie Lindtner sont une réponse agressive à la condition de la femme, alors que Macaulay met à jour l'anxiété de la femme qui attend la révélation de soi inhérente à l'écriture.

Long out of print, but particularly timely, are two remarkably similar novels, *The Dangerous Age* (*Den Farlige Alder*), written by the Danish writer, Karin Michaelis in 1910, and *Dangerous Ages*, published in 1921 by Rose Macaulay.¹ Both novels are about the psychological pain women suffer at midlife, but as the plural in Macaulay's title implies, the crisis actually transcends a particular moment, experience and symptomatology by resonating throughout all the women's lives in these novels. Like the women at midlife, even those too young or too old to experience menopause are confounded by the discovery that their creative outlets are tied to a particular biological function. Whether single or married, beyond childbearing or childless, they are defined by ties to mothering and to domestic space.

Each work begins with a woman turning forty-three who confronts newly awakened desires for self-definition

outside family life. Divorced and childless, Elsie Lindtner in *The Dangerous Age*, builds a house on an island where she hopes to discover herself at last. Neville Bendish in *Dangerous Ages* decides to return to her medical studies, interrupted by marriage and raising two children. But in both women this surge of consciousness and energy is overwhelmed by emotional turbulence leading to breakdown. Only because their intense desires finally erupt, do these women recognize them. To discover their desires leads not to self-expression, but to fear of being exposed: as not only sexually undesirable and useless, but also out of control and incoherent—crazy. Precisely because the word is never mentioned, menopause is dramatized in both novels as women's devalued and silenced sense of self—as what they come to believe are incurably disordered and limited minds and bodies.²

Michaelis reveals the cost of women's fears while dramatizing a mode of self-expression through which women can reassess their value to themselves. In *The Dangerous Age*, Elsie's diary and letters become an aggressive, rational response to women's condition. Macaulay, by contrast, in the characters of Neville's sister Nan, a novelist and critic, and in Neville's anxiety about writing her examinations, reveals women's anxiety attending the self-revelation inherent in writing. Michaelis's narrative design is shaped by a woman expressing herself in forms which conform only to a process of discovering her feelings. Macaulay uses a traditional English genre to contain the possible breakout of her feelings about women's relations with each other and how they manage to live with their unresolvable conflicts. Reading these novels together creates a powerful sense of complex ambivalences haunting women even today. How can women identify, express and sustain a sense of self in the face of lingering anxiety about sustaining myths of women's nurturing capacities?

Although it appeared ten years earlier than *Dangerous Ages*, Michaelis's work is the more radical presentation of women's condition.³ Michaelis joins with her female characters to rail against those sexual ideologies which oppress them all.⁴ Narrated through letters and fragments of her diary, *The Dangerous Age* dramatizes the consciousness of Elsie Lindtner as she records her attempts to understand her enervating alterations of moods and needs and as she responds to the dilemmas of her friends. Thus a range of women's experiences is filtered through Elsie's search for a voice which would render their desires coherent. Although reviewers spoke admiringly of Michaelis's candor about "Nature's climax," they diagnosed the problems of Elsie Lindtner, Michaelis's heroine, as "hysterical sexual appetite" or vanity resulting from the imminent loss of youth and beauty.⁵ Elsie's cries, whispers, pleas, whines, and aphorisms become coherent to her and to the reader only as she draws closer to the women she writes to and about. Without the intervention of other points of view, this portrayal of agonized and confused voices brings the reader intensely close to the enactment of ongoing and relentless pain without treatment. Moreover, portraying a desperate struggle to recognize and express previously unacknowledged feelings condemns the values of marital discretion and politesse which conceal women from themselves and from each other in their silence.

Michaelis solved problems which beset the earlier triple-decker sensation novels to which her heightened story could be compared. Elaine Showalter observes that although "the sensation novels expressed female anger, frustration, and sexual energy more directly than before,"

their rage "is internalized or projected, never confronted, understood, and acted upon."⁶ In Michaelis's spare, condensed narrative, rage is the primary subject. There is little plot or incident to deflect her characters' intensity, to allow them to go their separate ways or to fall back on. There is only relentless confrontation—of Elsie and her friends, of Elsie and herself, and finally, of Elsie and her readers.

Assuming, as did Rebecca West, that Macaulay read *The Dangerous Age*, we can see the later work as a critical reaction to the "tousled novel of the emotions." West felt that Michaelis's intense portrayal of middle-aged anguish "struck [Macaulay] as a degrading simplification" and "to exhibit the complicated truth," she wrote about four generations of women "to show that 'all ages are dangerous to all people in this dangerous life we lead.'"⁷ Macaulay's critique of the Michaelis work may have been well intended, but more importantly, her novel exposes her own defense against "the complicated truth."

Macaulay's novel seems to join forces with those critics who blame women for feeling discontent when their mothering duties are over and who scold: "it is better that middle-aged women should be unhappy, used up, and out of a job" rather than sacrifice their "civic virtue" or domestic duties. "What they do with themselves after, when their most important function is finished, is a matter of small importance" (*The Spectator*, 84). The *ex cathedra* judgment represents the community of values within which Macaulay designed a narrative structure and voice. Although it is possible to read *Dangerous Ages* as mocking the struggles of women, it also dramatizes the repression which becomes women's survival strategy. Her narrative voice and structure reveal that even in 1920, when women like herself became successful professionals, the pressures to deflect personal desires lead to writing that reveals women's frustration only in the dissonances of a highly conventional form. In drawing rooms designed for comedy, Macaulay's female characters chafe at each other, projecting their frustration and self-loathing. Constrained to express their individual desires, they enact both need for and revulsion against each other.

Macaulay's values are conflicted. On one hand, her heroine, forty-three year old Neville Bendish, could easily be blamed for her own breakdown as she prepares frantically to re-enter medical school, especially as the narrator expresses such bitter judgment of her fate. Yet by the time Neville's consciousness is presented, briefly and somewhat ambiguously towards the end of the novel, we can see how Macaulay's bitterness, sometimes disguised as brittle wit,

is really an expression of her own struggle. As the novel alternates between its drama of women's frustrated needs and the narrator's cynical commentary, what emerges is Macaulay's search for a narrative form to show how Neville's struggle is neither isolated nor unconflicted. The social comedy for which Macaulay was celebrated could not express the ambivalences she shared with other women about their own destiny, about their relations with other women, and about the forms of expression available to them.⁸ Indeed, almost in spite of itself, this novel shows how a woman writer who appears to offer homage to a time-honoured genre actually splits it in two as she exposes what women say when the men leave the drawing room for their port and cigars.

Dangerous Ages is structured by the birthdays and family gatherings of four generations of Hilary women. Except for a few brief appearances, Macaulay disregards the "civilized, sensitive and progressive" husbands, sons and lovers of her female characters.⁹ This narrative move shows how the novel of manners cannot survive the dominance of women's voices, even when mediated by a narrator who tries excruciatingly to keep the lid on their unmannerly outbursts (20). Each reunion focuses on one woman's anguish about aging and failed expectations while younger and older women around her enact their pain in rivalries with each other while murmuring platitudes to avoid confrontation. The opening scene registers a moment of intense pleasure and pain—Neville's forty-third birthday. Enjoying her extraordinary vigour and boundless love for family, Neville suddenly feels "her intense life hurrying swiftly to annihilation" (14). Neville's crisis, however, does not originate at this moment. Her sense of loss has accrued from being valued solely in terms of the prescribed "work of her life...making a home for her husband and children" (31). When children leave home, according to Neville, a woman's emotional energy threatens to "consume" her (53). Yet her intellectual energy is excess baggage in family life and thus atrophies and cannot be revived. It is as though intellect is depleted along with those hormones necessary to fertility. Describing Neville's mother, great-grandmother Hilary assesses the cost of relying on maternal responsibilities as a life's work: "What mind she had...ran all to seed during her married life, so it's pretty useless now. She spent herself on your father and all you children, and now she's bankrupt" (50). The combination of Neville's image and Mrs. Hilary's conveys women's capacities as an oxymoron, as though her mind and body, although supposedly contained in one whole being, were at odds. The very structure of the debate among Macaulay's women reflects how her conflicted stance towards the ideology of mothering is ex-

pressed by dissonance. Her characters' overdetermined language co-opts yet mocks salon wit and myths of mothering while breaking the silences conferred on women by the genre she chose.

Deprived of outlets for resurging creative energies, Neville feels "disembodied, devitalized and driven inward" (19). The novel's imagery conveys the sense that a woman's feeling at midlife of being full of herself yet depleted is analogous to the hysterical pregnancy of an unrealized self. Midlife is envisioned here as a disease originating in a woman's unfortunate struggle against a now useless but internalized ordination to mother others. Whether she finds people to nurture or rejects her call, she is trapped and/or breaks down. This novel does not portray a woman's life cycle or language as an ongoing process of self-realization. Because women are taught that their value ends with motherhood, midlife can neither be realized as a pathway to further growth nor produce a language of self-expression. Yet motherhood also represents a bind. For the untapped ambitions of Neville, her sister Nan's career as a writer, the restlessness and discontent of their mother, and the passive acquiescence to death of great-grandmother Hilary all mock the biological imperative to motherhood. As each of these women assumes a maternal role, she finds that while it depletes her creative energies, she is left wanting something else which remains unformulated and therefore unarticulated.

Dangerous Ages is marked by rage against biological determinism that is projected onto others by blaming the victim and deflected in the bitterness of its adjectives, but never expressed directly. Although the novel discredits a myth of an ordering and bountiful mother nature, women are blamed for discovering that their power is both illusory and entrapping. Confronting her uselessness at midlife, Neville flies "in the face of the fool nature," attempting "to break her absurd rules, and wrest out of the breakage something for oneself" (53). But the rules break her. As though disintegration is a natural event at midlife, Neville's rebellious attempt at regeneration is made to seem an aberration destructive to the perpetuation of the natural order. She comes to view her futile attempt to write examinations for medical school as an inappropriate appropriation of the language of a man's world, as "egotism goaded to unwholesome activity" (234). With mythic justice, her breakdown avenges the ecology of motherhood. She is forced to return to her prescribed role: she must nurse her bruised daughter who will survive to become a wife and mother in her own time. The price Neville pays reveals how the myth of the angel in the house is alive and well and still destructive to women in

the language they use to describe their fate. A step closer to the living death of her mother, Neville is well on her way towards completing her "natural" cycle: "It's all in the course of nature, and the sooner 'tis over the sooner to sleep" (287).

Macaulay shows her conflicted feelings about women's struggle to free themselves from this myth as she reveals their destructive dependency on it and uses satire to distance herself from their failed escapes. Neville's mother is trapped in a bitter parody of psychoanalysis as a path to self-definition. She is treated contemptuously by the good doctor who in turn is ridiculed by the narrator. With no other recourse, Mrs. Hilary remains bound to her daughters who both need and reject her. Neville's daughter Gerda and sister Nan illustrate how ambivalence about self-definition derives from a lifelong crisis of dependency. Alike in preferring career—defined as writing—over marriage, these women nevertheless become fierce rivals for a man who only wants a dependent woman. Nan wins the bicycle race to which Gerda challenges her, but loses her lover to her more fragile rival. Despite the mythic evocation of their intrepid ride, Gerda and Nan lose all desire for self-sufficiency and for writing. It seems that even a myth of women's heroism is destructive because it cannot reconcile the energy required for unconventional, "lawless" forms of self-expression with the need to mother (211). In this way, Nan's need to be nurtured subsumes her urge to write and is transformed into a desire to nurture. Escaping from her loss, she finds solace in nursing the sick artist, Stephen Lumley, and grief in her longing for her own mother.

When Nan is in Rome with Stephen, her mother comes to rescue her, exposing the source of women's dependency and aphasia. Mother and daughter enact the confusion and rage produced by needing attachment to feel complete and separation in order to feel autonomous. Unable to resolve this dilemma, they confirm the destructive power of the myth which governs them. In the novel's most powerful and authentic moment, the narrator articulates what the characters cannot—what a silenced Neville enacts when she nurses her daughter, what lies behind women's conflicted bond with other helpless women. The only word imagined for women's still nascent desires is mother:

The crying child wants its mother; the mother wants to comfort the crying child. A good bridge, but one inadequate for the strain of daily traffic. The child, having dried its tears, watches the bridge break again, and thinks it a pity but inevitable. The

mother, less philosophic, may cry in her turn, thinking perhaps that the bridge may be built this time in that way; but, the child having the colder heart, it seldom is (228).

The cool tone reflected in images of daily traffic and a child's dried tears deflects the passion underlying mother-child relationships in this novel. The narrator's distanced voice is an attempt to separate from this relationship. Yet the passage expresses ambivalence, frustration and despair as well. Whatever forms Nan's writing took, Macaulay clearly does not see it as an outlet for these feelings. Macaulay's narrative voice speaks for Nan and her mother, empathizing yet saving herself and Nan as authors from confronting the consequences of these feelings. The inadequate but good bridge suggests a yearning to build and sustain mother-child relations, despite the feeling that each of them is destined only to destroy it. Considering this doomed but necessary relationship, the narrator's tone may thus be considered a defensive strategy making it possible to survive such intense but contradictory needs. It is as though the narrator's feeling can no longer be contained by the constraints of social comedy. The witty if bitter repartee between women has been revealed as a masquerade. Conventional drawing room language can no longer conceal the conflicted bond between women which ties them inexorably to a destiny precluding self-discovery and expression outside nurturing roles.

Macaulay's feelings about dependency are legitimized by her language of characterization. As each woman turns against her need to nurture or to be nurtured, as she unsuccessfully negotiates relations with other women, all of the female characters in *Dangerous Ages* come to represent not individuals with similar experiences, but links in a chain of uneasy femaleness. Each woman is attached to but chafes against the other; each one enjoys her resemblance to the other, but moves apart to prove she is really different.¹⁰ For example, Neville and Nan's sister-in-law Rosalind only feels fulfilled when contemptuous of her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law. Individual expression is thus thwarted by a need to replay maternal dependency and rivalry among sisters in all relationships. If qualities associated with mothering are necessary insofar as nurture and empathy are necessary to interdependence, the problem lies in the way these women are bound by conflicted dependence, not interdependence. Rosalind cannot stop her venomous remarks to and about the Hilary women because she really wants to be one of them, not because she feels separate and superior. The women's competitive dependence on each other precludes the separateness necessary to interdependence and to individual-

tion.¹¹ Dependence also makes Gerda ill-equipped to identify her creative impulse while Nan's becomes useless to her.

Conflicted attachments between women precludes resolution of their ongoing crises and sense of incoherence. With no alternative social context or language in which to view themselves, these women live out a cycle of biologically determined events sanctioned by a myth which has become ideology. Hence their crises seem aberrations of nature, causing the emotional and linguistic turbulence of midlife which makes them endlessly dependent. Macaulay's novel ends with a chapter called "The Key," in which these words appear: "I certainly don't see quite what all the fuss is about" (242). The last word is given to Neville's sister Pamela, a "keen, debonair...detached, ironic, cool and quiet" woman: "Pamela...seemed lightly, and as it were casually, to swing a key to the door against which Neville, among many others, beat" (241). This approval is confirmed by both the novel's detached, ironic voice and by how closely Pamela's voice resembles that of the author's serious essays.

Another side of Pamela's character, however, reveals Macaulay's ambivalence about women's relations, about her own attitude towards Pamela, and the form and language of her novel. Pamela's relationship with her friend Frances Carr is so close that they like to think they read each other's thoughts. Mentioned much earlier in the novel, almost as a throw-away line, this information is crucial to any "key" to the ideology of women's lifelong crisis as depicted in this work. Pamela submerges herself in Frances Carr's expressly maternal care. While this friendship keeps her separate from her family, she is fused to her friend. Macaulay presents them as fulfilled, but she uses Nan in all her nervous energy to rebuke them for being "so terrifically self-abnegating" (77). Pamela's unconflicted feelings about her family and detached understatement about self-purpose and aging belie intense needs for both reliance on maternal support and distance from it. "'Age,' returned Pamela, negligent and cool, 'has extremely little to do with anything that matters. The difference between one age and another is, as a rule, enormously exaggerated'" (241).

I think we must see Macaulay's position as mediated between her portrait of Pamela and the other women in the novel. Pamela is the defense against the acute pain suffered by her sisters, niece and mothers. She reflects the narrator's voice, distanced from the frustrations of the other women yet immersed in them as well, as Pamela is in relation to her friend. Macaulay's portrait of Pamela and

her friend combines with Neville's last statement to suggest a yearning for women's ability to nurture each other towards interdependence. Travelling to escape her "need for self-expression," Neville is criticized by the narrator as "a spoilt, vain, ambitious egoist," but admired as well for striving for what "might be a dream, that liberty, but...a dream worth a fight" (234, 235).

Macaulay's yearning for women's interdependence as a pathway towards freedom from oppressive mythologies is answered by Michaelis's narrative. In *The Dangerous Age*, the heroine's writing is used to explore the ambivalences accompanying women's midlife desires, fears and defenses. Unlike Nan and Gerda, whose writing cannot become an act of self-definition because they remain conflicted about their need for other women, the singular voice of Elsie Lindtner ultimately joins in harmony with those of the women she has found repugnant. Having moved to an island home designed for the purpose of her self-discovery, Elsie Lindtner suddenly and helplessly feels assaulted by conflicting desires for attachment and autonomy. As she writes about marriage, her home, and women's relations with one another, she discovers her essence while revealing her fear of its loss. After several months, she impulsively decides to claim the love of the young architect who built her house. Discovering that he no longer loves her, she then pursues her ex-husband who she learns is now engaged to a nineteen-year-old debutante. Desolate, she leaves the house to travel around the world with her housemaid-companion, Jeanne. As Elsie's anxious voice reveals, she is both victim and accomplice in her distress.

Although Elsie's complaints could be contributed to neurasthenic side effects of menopause, the contexts in which she frames her feelings suggest a more pervasive anguish. Her shifting moods are projected outward towards her friends to whom she writes angry, scolding letters, deflected in the form of distanced and cynical axioms, and finally confronted in anguished entries in her diary. Collectively, these voices condemn women, defend Elsie from the pain they suffer, but also affirm this pain as Elsie's voices come to resemble those of other women. At first Elsie expresses only contempt for women who cannot seem to manage their unnamed but frustrated needs. Although she claims she "only understands and admires [her] own sex," she is repelled by Agatha Ussing's suicide.¹² Agatha's suicide externalizes the feelings from which Elsie seeks refuge. Tormented by energies unfulfilled by marriage or sexual affairs, Agatha loses control when her "inner life" becomes "madness...a malady incident to [her] age," (59). In fact, her disorder reflects the inchoate feelings which have plagued her all her life and

which have no language of expression connecting her to a sympathetic community. To relieve such pain Elsie advises a strategy of suppressing uncontrollable desires because "If a woman...reveal[s] herself to a husband or a lover just as she really is, he would think she was suffering from some incurable mental disease" (60).

In this novel, midlife reveals that such treatment only exacerbates the symptoms which deflect an incurable disorder: the conflict between an amorphous sense of self raging for definition and the rigid socially imprinted language of self containment from which there is no escape. No wonder that Agatha is driven into an insane asylum, an institution designed to contain uncontrollable fantasies and incoherent voices, but actually the mirror image of the institutions holding her captive: her husband's home and her motherhood. Confronting the rage emerging from her helplessness, Agatha kills herself.

Elsie also expresses contempt for her friend Magna Wellman, who engages in indiscreet affairs rather than the self-protective strategem Elsie prescribes. That Elsie's contempt for other women is a function of her growing inability to mask her own desires is illustrated by the first letter presented in the narrative. In it, Elsie expresses envy and disdain for her cousin Lillie's well-managed life. Instead of maintaining a chastising tone as does Macaulay's narrator, Elsie's attitudes toward other women change as *The Dangerous Age* charts her ever shifting consciousness about her own pain. Later, when she discovers in a letter from Lillie's husband that her cousin had been involved with another man, she becomes Lillie's fierce advocate. This change of heart reflects a process taking place between her first letter to Lillie and this one. Elsie has gone from enjoying her decision to live alone, to fear of being isolated, to reaching out desperately to the men in her former life, to realizing that she must confront her conflicting sense of self. Only as she writes an impassioned response to Lillie's husband does Elsie see an affinity between her moral and emotional isolation and the self Lillie hid behind a mask of serenity. Lillie has been "accounted a stranger and a sinner" upon discovery of "longings and deficiencies in her inner life of which she was barely conscious, or which she did not understand," but felt compelled to enact at the moment of her midlife (157-158, 151).

The novel's structure brings Elsie inexorably closer to other women, forming, like Macaulay's novel, a continuum of women's crises and voices. Unlike Macaulay's narrative, however, Elsie's writing progresses from the displaced expression of her own helplessness and rage to

understanding and articulating that she and her friends share the same plight. Unlike the failure of Nan's writing, Gerda's poetry, or Neville's examinations, Elsie's writing clarifies her dilemmas. Elsie finally recognizes her communion with other women when she writes about recognizing her own fears in Jeanne's. Alone together, removed from conventional society, Elsie and Jeanne experience a "mortal terror" of being isolated in the "locked and barred" villa encased in dense fog and "dead silence" (134, 136). The house built to her specifications, the many rooms of her own, only expose the secret, as Showalter observes, that withdrawal from the world of men and adult sexuality to one's inner space, leaves women to confront each other as conflicted daughters and mothers (33, 158). Without the safety-valve of artful deception, these two women, one at midlife, the other in her twenties, are left to confront and name the need felt so desperately by every woman in this novel. As Jeanne "rushes[s] into the room without knocking, pale as a corpse," she clings to the heretofore forbidding Elsie "like a child awakened from a bad dream" (135). Drawn to Jeanne's undisguised vulnerability as she is to Lillie's, Elsie then retreats to discover the language with which to shape the meaning of this encounter and undo the "dead silence" of women's relations.

Elsie's retreat suggests that although intimacy between women frees them from isolation, there is a threatening bond inherent in all such relationships, but highlighted by differences in age. Particularly as Jeanne tells Elsie the story of her mother's sexual indiscretions, the two intertwined narratives convey the fear that younger women are joined to their mothers in sharing the same disordered and incoherent sense of self and destiny. As Elsie refashions Jeanne's tale into writing, she discovers that even as each struggles for self-definition, the young woman and the middle-aged are forced to see themselves in each other. Sensing that other women reflect her own unexpressed needs and fears, Elsie claims that she would rather "walk through an avenue of naked men than appear before another woman without clothes" (85).

Her writing, of course, accomplishes both, but with reversed results. The paradoxical private and public writing in Elsie's diary, as it becomes Michaelis's novel and provokes critical reception, discloses women's support and men's contempt. Unmasked, the needs of Magna Wellman, Lillie Rothe, Jeanne's mother, and Elsie expose the illusory nature of all institutions that seem to support them. Such an unmasking also traces another similarity to and difference from Macaulay's novel. Macaulay's narrative voice may suggest the same fear as Elsie's, but its

cynical comment dismisses the possibility of resolution. Together, Macaulay's irresolution and Michaelis's confrontation suggest that women need each other to piece together the fragmented sense of self revealed by feeling isolated and suffocated as well as dead and unformed.

The intense need for nurture and support Elsie and Jeanne show each other reveals an insufficiency fundamental to all women in the two novels: they appear trapped in dependence on the insufficient and unexpressed other. *The Dangerous Age* questions how the relationship between women is determined by feelings originating in other places and relationships. That Elsie should respond with terror to the house she designed for herself suggests that there is no safe place for women, either in relation to other people or in institutions such as marriage or those called asylums. Indeed, Elsie's reasons for leaving her opulent home and stable marriage and for recoiling from Jeanne are inexplicable, except as her reaction to her new home reflects her feelings about any domestic space. For as she reports in this work and more emphatically in her sequel, her life with Richard Lindtner satisfied their mutual interests with an emotional distance each seemed to prefer. Yet she reacts violently to her marriage as a "crime against her personality" (37). This violation of her being is already part of Elsie's consciousness in her recollections of the "gilded spikes" surrounding the house of the old but rich man to whom she was once engaged, but who repelled her physically (178). Wanting the power and prestige afforded by these men, Elsie has been all too eager to squelch her own emotional and intellectual growth.

As Elsie's feelings about her marriage, villa and other women reveal, women desire and fear both living with themselves and with others—autonomy and intimacy. Marriage, the institution which structures women's adult lives, fosters and fulfills only their fears. Although the lack of emotional connection might seem to preserve autonomy, the demands of marital intimacy violate it. Necessarily complicit in the bargain to achieve her only stability, a woman gives her mind and body to perpetuate the sanctity of the institution. But as Elsie recalls her years with Richard Lindtner, nothing in the arrangement of marital intimacy nurtures and sustains her inner life, her hidden desires. As the novel progresses, the images Elsie uses to describe her growing anxieties reveal that her new house only mirrors all the places and relationships which stifled her. Instead of providing a place to grow, the "living grave" can only "bury" her hidden desires (121, 147). The world designed for her protection not only disables her from imagining a world in which she can take risks

and articulate her sense of self, but ensures early death. The world gives no sense of what Elsie really is; as she and her friends report, in their world, women cannot express dissatisfaction, even to each other, or they will be exposed as empty and wanting. They will face what the terror in Elsie's villa revealed—that without their own forms of self-expression, women live out their nightmares in domestic space.

For both Macaulay and Michaelis, menopause is the climactic moment which fulfills women's worst fears about inherent disorder and inarticulation and justifies the fears of those who depend on them. No wonder then, that Elsie writes to the architect she loves, she "cannot allow any human to penetrate my inner life" (49). Because the sustenance of home and family depend on women's natural bounty, domestic space must also serve as a correctional institution. It is as though only domesticity can rehabilitate women's subversive drives—indeed sublimate them by providing dutiful activities which leave their drives unarticulated. To leave home is therefore to abandon themselves to self-destruction. For if domestic space is home to mothering, indeed, the trope for mothering, to leave it is to leave behind women's assumed core identity or at least its only available names: wife and mother. But in the end, the home fails as a sanctuary protecting women from drives which threaten everyone; even Elsie's white villa cannot prevent the break-out of the hidden self—that which endangers both the sustaining self and its asylum. Midlife reveals that there is no place and no time for women to test and sort out their value in language which expresses themselves.

Women in these novels pay heavily for the futile effort of trying to remain intact. As their strategies for concealment no longer work at midlife, the threat of madness becomes certain. Trapped in a world and in selves that no longer pretend to work for them, those women who cannot discover their own voices continue to war with each other, subverting the power they represent together. For just as their conflicting desires for autonomy and intimacy are silenced but emerge uninvited anyway, so women's ability to nurture is subverted into rejection of each other. As each woman sees herself mirrored in another, she confronts her own irritation and helplessness at being considered capable only of mothering. Rejecting each other strikes a blow at mothering, but of course at themselves as well. Midlife and menopause conflate this experience into taboo subjects, expressed only in silence. Taking transgressive risks then becomes the only available language of self-representation: "I must do this to save my own life!"¹² Unlike Ibsen's Nora, whose recognition of her own desires

and moral imperatives and consequent actions represents triumph, women in these novels shut doors on themselves. Recognition for them offers no catharsis, only another view of being imprisoned and silenced in themselves and in the world.

What is especially remarkable about *Dangerous Ages* is twofold: it adopts Michaelis's subject; yet it avoids the method that would allow Macaulay to imprint her own sense of women's lives. If Michaelis's heroine does finally appear naked before other women, Macaulay trusts only the covering which strains against its own restraints. Macaulay thus dramatizes the repression of women in a form which literalizes restraint.¹³ She subscribes to a genre which distances and diffuses passion, where "rapier" wit silences women. But social comedy almost goes over the edge as a result of the tension of Macaulay's held-back feelings. At various junctures, in scenes intended as comic, such as Mrs. Hilary's visit to her daughter-in-law Rosalind, the sharply honed aphorism which is designed to evoke a controlled titter, instead leaves the reader depressed and anxious for the fate of the characters' and the author's creative energies.

Writing for Macaulay is an anxiety-provoking enterprise. Her characters who write do so with feverish intensity, but with no satisfaction. As she turns to nurturing her lover and away from writing, Nan, like Neville, who disappears from the novel until she returns home to nurse her daughter, is silenced. For both, the role of nurturer reveals no correlative and hence no language with which to identify women's needs; their desires for self-expression bear no relation to needs they satisfy in others. Their desires outside bounds of mothering become hidden from everyone, even themselves because they return to old, contrary expectations: unconditional attachment and selflessness. Like her author who was professionally successful but struggled with the tradition she chose, Nan is unable to confront openly the hopes that accompany her bleak portrait of women's limits. For her, writing is ultimately not a way out, but in the English tradition, a confirmation of the forms of containment. Yet every time Macaulay's cynical narrator comes up against a character's half-expressed desire or her own desire for women's interdependence, their conflicting voices create cracks in the retaining wall of social comedy. Only by reading Michaelis's novel can we imagine what Macaulay's women might have expressed openly: a chaotic amalgam of enraged voices and actions which could be judged as signs of derangement, but which lead to new understanding and rationality.

Both novels assert that only when women openly recognize their desperation are they forced to take the supreme risk. With nowhere else to turn, they turn to each other. While Macaulay's women disappoint each other, Michaelis's women discover that their only freedom lies in interdependence with other women.¹⁴ Macaulay's circumspect presentation of women's dilemmas reflects their isolation from power, from each other, from a language of self-expression, but above all, it expresses her own acute ambivalence about women's writing. The movement of women circling each other reflects the structure of these novels which in turn enacts the dilemma facing the women. Although we assume that literature enriches our understanding of human conflict by playing out various alternatives, complexities, and even contradictions, Macaulay's novel demonstrates the relentless cycle characterizing the psycholinguistic suffering of women and her ambivalence about supporting the claims of patriarchal writing. Her work enacts the centripetal force of social and psychological pressures on women who may never have the chance to emerge whole and varied from their struggles for self-definition. The claustrophobic sense of her characters' futile and chaotic efforts and their conflicted ties to each other necessitate dramatic action which shows how their rigidly deterministic worlds recreate a solipsistic and unexpressed sense of self.

While Macaulay protects herself by keeping her characters and readers at some distance, Michaelis takes the risk of staying intensely close to her characters. Although writing is an act of betrayal at the beginning of the novel when Elsie reveals her friends' stories with a sneer, writing later inscribes a community of women. Michaelis facilitates a process by which readers are drawn in to form a new community of values, as we participate in making Elsie's diary and letters public, and help name the unnamed desires of the women. In this way, Michaelis critiques and revises the historical relegation of women's writing to private forms which denied them the power of a public forum.¹⁵ Where Macaulay leaves her women still in conflict with each other, Michaelis takes her community of women even beyond the resolution of this work. In her sequel, *Elsie Lindtner*, Michaelis has Elsie form an interdependent community of two with Magna Wellman. They live in separate houses in a rural area away from social pressures of the city. Elsie has adopted a boy and now, beyond midlife, but first discovering a sense of themselves, she and Magna watch their children model the interdependence of their mothers.

As Elsie's shifting attitudes are stabilized as a result of her growing empathy for other women, the two novels

about her represent a way out of madness and isolation. As creator and character use writing to free women from the bonds of how others imagine them, Michaelis urges a new form of expression to replace the metaphors of domestic space. The favorite symbol of women writers is transmogrified in this work into one far more capable of expressiveness: writing. Above all else, what emerges in this work as the radicalizing force is the writing of Michaelis and of Elsie. Elsie's diaries and letters overturn the social conventions which kept women alienated from each other. The silence or snubs which constituted women's public interactions are pierced by the confessions Elsie records and expresses. Defiantly exposing the feelings which threaten to destroy what is left of stability, Michaelis and Elsie reap from the wreckage an imagined world of their own. Elsie's diaries and letters are acts of self-definition. Every act of self-deception is accompanied by reassessment in terms which give new shape, meaning, and value to feelings that seem chaotic and destructive. Her initial dismissal of Jeanne and fantasizing about Malthe are transformed into an understanding of her all women's sexual energy. Unlike women novelists who either imagined their heroines in a state of renunciation or failure, Michaelis endows Elsie with her own successful identity: a writer of powerful and authentic expression. Elsie's writing overturns the conventions which formerly constricted a sense of self to produce a new and unexpected language expressing the unknown territory of a woman's feelings about herself.

NOTES

1. Although contemporary reviewers noted that *Dangerous Ages* was inspired by the Michaelis novel, there are no references in Macaulay's published work to Michaelis. *The Dangerous Age* was translated into twelve languages (*The New York Times*, July 16, 1911).
2. Both novels prefigure a debate about biological determinism which is unresolved even today: whether the discomforts of menopause begin at midlife and are determined largely by biology, or are exacerbated by lifelong anxiety about autonomy, intimacy and sense of purpose. Whether menopause is a physical condition of either Macaulay's or Michaelis's protagonists is not entirely clear; in both works midlife and menopause are assumed to be the same. Recent studies view menopause in terms of relationships between biological change and socially induced psychological factors. See Madeleine Goodman, Alice S. Rossi, Rosalind C. Barnett and Grace K. Baruch, Mary Clare Lennon, Malkah Notman, M.D., Paula Weidinger, and Lillian B. Rubin.
3. Michaelis is being rediscovered by Scandinavian feminist critics. Susanne Fabricius discusses how Michaelis saw menopause "as a predominantly hormonal and biological phenomenon," and "veil[s] the tabooed [subject]...in often cryptic metaphors and symbols." Michaelis's work is studied at length by Tine Andersen and Karen Klitgaard Povlsen.
4. Nina Auerbach cites nineteenth century myths about women which Macaulay and Michaelis see as still powerful forces in their times: "inferior brain weight, educated women's tendency to brain fever, a ubiquitous maternal instinct, raging hormonal imbalance," (111).
5. (*Bookman*, 179; *Athenaeum*, 385). The anonymous reviewer for *The New York Times* (September 3, 1911) felt that Elsie's problems would be solved if her lover would only "haul her forth after the manner of a cave man and carry her away in triumph." Others simply blamed the novel's revelations and heroine on "women's lot." *The New York Times* reviewer praised the novel's "unique form" and "artistic feeling," but found "the poor, cheap little soul" of its heroine too offensive. Easy to dismiss today, these all-knowing voices must also be seen as attempts to silence a woman's voice "making some piteous confession which...lays bare every half healed wound of [other women]" (Bateman, 1122). May Bateman praises and analyzes Michaelis's novel in relation to cultural values.
6. Showalter, p. 180.
7. "Notes on Novels," p. 277. The literary history of the two novels shows that no matter how Michaelis or Macaulay treat the subject of midlife and women's roles, they are inextricably linked by public voices which would rather women remain silent. Macaulay's work confirms Bateman's suspicion about Michaelis's novel that "certain passages will probably be deleted wholesale before the book is presented to the English public" (1127). This may be why Michaelis's English and American critics responded so contemptuously. Although both novels were both widely read in their day and according to reviews, caused quite a stir, they quickly disappeared from view, swallowed up by entrenched beliefs about women's midlife that confirmed the views of the critics.
8. Macaulay doubts women's abilities in her essays "Woman: I. Her Troubled Past" and "Woman II. Her Dark Future." According to Elaine Showalter, women writers of the '20s retreat in bitterness and self-loathing from the War as they fail to free themselves from traditional expectations. They "punish and blame their heroines for their weaknesses" by invoking "post-Darwinian determinism and retributive systems of almost theological rigidity" (244, 245).
9. Rose Macaulay, *Dangerous Ages* New York: Boni and Liveright, 1921. Future references will be cited in the text.
10. Judith Kegan Gardiner suggests that because women are more comfortable with fluid ego boundaries, they may also create characters with more fluid distinctions. Macaulay and Michaelis show this view to be ahistorical by creating characters terrified of being stuck to each other by cultural expectations. Feminist psychoanalytic critics reframe mother-daughter relationships with implications for women writers. See Nancy Chodorow, Jane Flax, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Abel. Flax notes the ambivalences in mother-daughter relationships between desires for nurturances and autonomy.
11. See Jessica Benjamin's critique of the Freudian model of separation and autonomy and her theory of women's intersubjectivity as a response.
12. Karin Michaelis, *The Dangerous Age: Letters and Fragments From a Woman's Diary*. Translated from Danish by Marcel Prevost New York: John Lane, 1911. Future references will be cited in the text.
13. I wish to express my appreciation to Marilyn Williamson who saw this implication to my argument.
14. In an article, "Why Are Women Less Truthful Than Men?" I, Michaelis cites Nora as an example of a woman lying because her personal conscience "is independent of laws enacted to support the social order...the opposite of man" (186). In an interview, she claims not to be interested in "the cause of women's rights," but she also shows how when women need to lie to conform to social expectations, the "hurt no one else, but chiefly her own body" and mind ("Truthful", 187). Her views of women's fates are further elaborated in part II of the essay. In her 1911 interviews, Michaelis speaks with assurance and ebullience. Although she despairs of women's biological limitations, she views "the universe of her soul peopled with ...angles and with demons of which not even Dante or Milton ever dreamed" and sees "women's consciousness of her individuality" freeing her from being "an annex to her husband's ego" (*Twentieth Century*, October, 1911; *New York Times*, July 30, 1911). Her narra-

tive strategies raise the expectation of empathy for her female characters and anticipate women using society's institutions for their collective benefit.

15. Pamela Annis discusses how women writers have always mediated between "self-censorship and self-indulgence, silence and noise, rigid control and little or no control" (369).

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Tomorrow is as safe as middle age
I hear it threaten to be interesting
Each time hang up the phone
Into which someone snores
The surface of delirium
Brought on by an expensive substance
Smoked, inhaled, or rubbed into the skin
Like an answer sought just
Long enough to seem essential
Yet impossible to explain or give away
To temperatures up over 99
Where few dare venture
Crowded with thoughts
Ordained by invisible
Wizards of makeshift truth
Which turn out to be sentences

Sheila E. Murphy
Phoenix, Arizona