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KATHERINE CECIL THURSTON'S *JOHN CHILCOTE, M.P.*



Popularity and Literary Value in the Early Twentieth Century

Julianne Lamond

When Katherine Cecil Thurston published her second novel, *John Chilcote, M.P.* (London: Blackwood, 1904), it soon became “the novel of the season” across the English-speaking world. Upon her death in 1911, she was widely described as “The Popular Novelist” but the status and meaning of this popularity was not at all clear to contemporary readers and critics. *The Academy* began its review of her third novel with an expression of bewilderment about just what kind of writer she was:

Owing to the striking yet uncertain character of her previous stories the announcement of a new book by Mrs Thurston arouses more than ordinary expectation and curiosity. “John Chilcote” had a vogue to which the whole world of readers contributed, yet many of them felt uneasily, as they turned its pages, that they could not fully justify, nor even understand, the interest with which they followed that extraordinary story.¹

The uncertain literary status of *John Chilcote, M.P.*² is far from extraordinary. Using Thurston’s novel and its reception to consider the limits of existing approaches to understanding literary popularity, this essay complicates assumptions of “the radical differences between popular fiction and Literature”³ by looking at the section of the field constituted by works whose status as literary or popular is indeterminate at the time of their publication and reception, and which almost inevitably fall prey to what Franco Moretti describes as the “slaughterhouse of literature”, ending up in the “great unread.”⁴ In the early twentieth century—as now—these works make up a significant proportion of the literary field. Unlike Moretti, I am not interested in the question of why they didn’t “make the cut” but rather how their indeterminate status reveals the process of defining and attributing literary value as it was occurring in this period. The reception of *John*

Chilcote was transnational and thoroughly mediated, involving a set of negotiations between critics, readers, and publishers about what kind of novel it was, and thus how it should be valued. *John Chilcote* is not simply a boundary case in relation to the “great divide” between the literary and the popular; its reception suggests that this divide was, even by apparently straightforward measures, quite ambiguous in the very period that it is assumed to have become clearly defined.

I am not the first scholar to question the nature and historicity of this divide, but it is fair to say that the expansion of digital humanities and other forms of distant reading has only exacerbated a categorising impulse that has long attached to the study of popular fiction and its readers. When Gelder claimed, in 2004, that “popular fiction is the opposite of Literature,”⁵ he was restating (perhaps more baldly) an assumption underpinning the study of popular or mass fiction since at least 1932, when Q.D. Leavis published her *Fiction and the Reading Public*. Indeed, as Andreas Huyssen has argued so influentially, the assertion of this difference—the creation of a category of mass culture—fundamentally underpinned modernism as the cultural project that reset the goal posts for understanding literary prestige.⁶ There is no doubt about the pervasiveness of the belief in the “great divide” amongst writers from the turn of the century and scholars since, nor that the general consensus is that, as Hugh Walpole put it, “it was not until the early 1900’s that people began to talk about [novel writing] in solemn whispers as an Art that only Artists should be allowed to practise.”⁷ Huyssen describes the “discourse of the Great Divide” as especially dominant in two periods: “first in the last decades of the 19th century and the first few years of the 20th, and then again in the two decades or so following World War II.”⁸ This essay argues that however pervasive the language of cultural hierarchy was across this period, the practices of authors, publishers, and readers often belied it. In relation to popular British literature by Marie Corelli, Rosa Praed and others, Andrew McCann describes

a moment that was prior to that sense of consecration that literary studies has tended to take for granted throughout much of the twentieth century: a moment at which popular fictional forms could articulate claims to value that cut against both the elitism of emerging modernism and the leveling effects of commerce.⁹

The reception of Thurston and her contemporaries suggests that this was not a moment isolated to the late nineteenth century. The interstitial forms of literary subjectivity McCann describes existed, in varying forms, well into

the twentieth century. On the other side of the Atlantic, Lise Jaillant argues that “a ‘middle ground’ between the high and the low had, in fact, just started to emerge” in the American context by 1915.¹⁰ McCann’s and Jaillant’s studies assert a space before or after the “sense of consecration” that bifurcated the literary field.¹¹ There is a continuity here, as the writing and reception of Katherine Thurston and her contemporaries in the early part of the twentieth century suggests. Critics asserted a divide between high and low from the last two decades of the nineteenth century, as some continued to do in relation to Thurston’s work. From the late nineteenth century until well into the twentieth, a large proportion of the literary field was constituted by boundary cases in relation to which a sense of consecration was not taken for granted. These are works for which such a distinction is constantly blurred by the practices of publishers, writers, and readers. In attending to the notion of popularity as it threads through the reception of *John Chilcote* I suggest that literary practices that cut across the “great divide” were contemporaneous with the solidification of the identifiably mass-market genres of the twentieth century.

This “intermediate field of literary production”¹² is important for understanding the shifting relationship between literary value and the extent and nature of a work’s readership. Here I follow David A. Brewer in suggesting that literary popularity relates not only to the extent of a work’s sales, but also concerns a work’s continued circulation in public discussion and common knowledge: the “footprint” of works over time which “develops after the moment of initial publication.”¹³ Moretti describes a “social canon” which is decided not by the school, but by the market.¹⁴ Such “social canonicity” can also be described, more straightforwardly, as popularity. Popular novels such as Thurston’s were the battleground across which cultural hierarchy was negotiated, and much of this contestation took place in the pages of the periodical press. To study literary popularity in the press is to examine literary value in the terms which Robert J. Meyer-Lee proposes: the complicated networks of *acts* of valuing that constitute it.¹⁵ I suggest that it is best approached by means of a literary history that is fine-grained in its attention to book-historical evidence of reception and circulation and that is developmental in its interest in how a work’s status and readings change over time and form part of a broader set of position-takings in the field. I should also note that while Brewer is arguing for more qualitative research to temper the flattening excesses of digital humanities, the approach I am advocating here is predicated upon access to digitized records of circulation and the periodical press. The richness of evidence that can be uncovered

depends almost entirely on how well particular national institutions have digitized such records: thus much of the most nuanced and diverse evidence of Thurston's reception presented here is enabled by an outstanding Australian database, Trove.¹⁶ The popularity of *John Chilcote* suggests a literary field in the first decade of the twentieth century in which a divide between high and low literature was often asserted by critics, but thoroughly blurred by the practices of publishers, the press, readers, and authors themselves.

A Popular Novel

John Chilcote is a thrilling and sensational novel about a well-born politician who has a beautiful, intelligent wife and a desperate morphia addiction. In a deep London fog he meets a man who is improbably identical to him: John Loder, a down-and-out journalist. Chilcote asks Loder to stand in for him on the occasions when he is in the grip of his addiction, and Loder does so, realizing his own unacknowledged political ambitions and falling in love with Chilcote's wife. Like many of the works with which it shared space on most-borrowed and best-seller lists, *John Chilcote* is lightly self-aware of its perilous position in the literary field. It is one of a number of novels about politics popular in this decade whose sensational plots circled the very questions of cultural status and distinction that were to mark their reception.¹⁷

John Chilcote was published by reputable publishers in ways that attest to their imbrication in the practices of the mass market. This was a world in which cheap books "figured prominently in the lists of some of the largest and most respected publishers of all,"¹⁸ the boundaries between journalism and literary authorship were porous, literary agents managed authors' increasingly complex rights arrangements, and transatlantic publishing arrangements were the norm. Thurston claimed to have begun writing short stories in 1901–02, and, "as is the only way to deal with short stories, sent them round." Six were published, and one caught the eye of "a well-known literary agent, who suggested that Mrs Thurston should write a novel."¹⁹ This novel, *The Circle* (London: Blackwood, 1903), was reportedly serialized simultaneously in two magazines in Britain and one in America.²⁰ *John Chilcote, M.P.* was serialized in quality house magazines in Britain (*Blackwood's*) and America (*Harper's Bazaar*) as well as in newspapers, indicating an expectation that the novel would reach a broad market. The *Bookman* describes *John Chilcote's* publication in serial form in both *Blackwood's*

and *The Daily Mail* as “a conjunction quite unprecedented,” and a “striking tribute to its various powers of appeal.”²¹ It was subsequently published in one-volume form by Blackwood and Harper in 1904 at the customary prices for a new novel of six shillings and \$1.50 respectively. On publication, it was widely reviewed in newspapers and periodicals, from the *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Vogue* to the *Adelaide Advertiser*. However, it also quickly formed part of cheaper series and the even cheaper reprint market. It was published by Blackwood in a “Colonial Edition,” advertised in 1904 by established Hobart bookseller J. Walch and Sons at the “typical” colonial retail price of 2s 6d in paper covers.²² By 1910 Blackwood had published a shilling edition, and in 1907 it was advertised for sale even more cheaply—at 6d—by a bookseller in Geelong.²³ In America, Harper was aggressively asserting its copyright to the novel, under the title *The Masquerader*, and although it is somewhat more difficult to trace the novel’s price points in the American market, it was available very cheaply from at least 1907, when it was advertised for sale for 25c as part of a series of “World’s Famous Books.”²⁴

The production of *John Chilcote* was such to enable it both to reach an extensive market and to be respectable and potentially serious. It certainly reached its market, figuring prominently in one of the more recent measures of literary popularity in this period: the best-seller list. In the periodical most responsible for the modern iteration of the best-seller list, the *British Bookman*, Thurston’s novel appeared regularly. It was included in the list of “books which have been most in demand” from September 1904 until March 1905, alongside reports of Thurston’s swift rise to fame; a full page illustration “specially drawn for the *Bookman* by Charles Horrell” in the Christmas issue; and detailed considerations of the novel in essays about “Society in Fiction” and “Novelists of Today.”²⁵ In its American counterpart, *The Masquerader* sat at the top of the monthly list of “most popular books in order of demand” from November 1904 to January 1905.²⁶ The reiterative relationship between advertisements, reviews and reported popularity in relation to Thurston’s novel supports Laura J. Miller’s assertion that “the best-seller list is actively participating in the doings of the book world rather than just passively recording it.”²⁷ Thurston’s rankings in the *Bookman*’s lists were reported in newspapers as part of broader discussions of the popularity of her novel,²⁸ but I would also add to Miller’s account that there were many different kinds of such lists proliferating across the print media in this period, which given their position in more general periodicals (aimed not at the book trade but at a general readership), participated in the marketing and reception of books to an even greater extent than the

Bookman lists. Thurston's novel was ranked in several such lists: some, like the *Academy and Literature's* "Book Market" and the *New York Tribune's* "What People are Reading," mimicked the *Bookman's* methods of gathering reports from booksellers.²⁹ Others drew on the experiences of librarians, who both reported on the popularity of Thurston's novel (it remained on the list of "Books in Demand" in the New York Public Library from December 1904 to September 1905)³⁰ and recommended it for stocking in other libraries.³¹ Other, more discursive, lists of "Books People Are Reading" offered opinion (and usually opprobrium) upon the popular works of the day.³²

While the best-seller list has been considered a precipitating factor in the development of the "great divide," to be included on such a list—and to be reviewed, as *John Chilcote* was, in newspapers and magazines—was actually a marker of some measure of distinction in the early twentieth century. Best-seller lists and newspaper and magazine book reviews in this period were inherently exclusive.³³ They usually only considered books of a class to be sold at relatively expensive prices in bookstores, rather than other kinds of venues such as newsstands, stationery stores, or (to some extent) by mail order. In the American context, Ellen Gruber-Garvey writes that the "'natural circle' of readers was bounded by class, taste, and education and excluded the buyers of cheap reprints."³⁴ Thurston's novel troubles this assertion, however, because it and other novels like it were published simultaneously within and outside of that bounded circle of readers.

Best-seller reports were one among many ways in which the popularity of *John Chilcote* was discussed in the press. Although the worst excesses of the age of "puffery and quackery" were over, in the early twentieth century the line between reviews, advertising, and promotion was not at all clear. Newspapers in this period would report on the popularity of a certain novel as an event in relation to sales, and the fraught question of what Christine Pawley calls the "library habit of reading"³⁵—indiscriminate, or indiscriminating, reading of fiction of uncertain repute—at the same time as publishing a wide range of other literary reports that attempted to work out what such popularity might mean. This was evident in the lively book reporting that took place across regional Australian papers in this period as well as in the pages of the New York and London press.

Popularity, Literary Value, and the Press

Unlike scholarly discussion since, newspapers and novels in the early twentieth century did not assume that the process of attributing literary value

took place within the bounds of the nation; they were consciously participating in an international market for both books and book-talk. As McKitterick notes, “internationalism was the dominant defining characteristic of the book trade” in this period. London and east-coast American publishing were intertwined: influential periodicals were regularly published in American and British editions.³⁶ *John Chilcote* was being discussed as an international best-seller before the term came into common usage, and its international popularity was both inherently newsworthy and used by publishers as a marketing tool.³⁷

In this period, understandings of cultural hierarchy and literary value were mediated across national contexts: not in exactly the same ways, everywhere, but in relation to one another. In the trans-national popularity of authors such as Thurston we can also see evidence of what we might call an international community of letters not at the level of cosmopolitan elites but also at the level of local journalists, critics and readers. A newspaper in Iowa conflates British and American readers into one public when announcing: “By simultaneous publication of a novel on both sides of the Atlantic, Katherine Cecil Thurston takes her place among those writers of fiction whose new books are eagerly awaited by the public.”³⁸ English, American, and Australian newspapers all reported on the popularity of Thurston’s novel in other countries: the *New York Times* reports that “it is bound to make a hit both in England, where it is getting long and commendatory reviews, and here,”³⁹ the *World’s News* (Sydney) notes that “the book is already famous in England; the same success may be predicted for it in Australia” and the following year that “it is in great demand both in England and America.”⁴⁰ An anecdote relating to its serialization in *Harper’s Bazaar* did the rounds of British and Australian papers, both as a snippet of book news and as an explicitly marked advertisement for the Harper edition: a reader reportedly wrote to the editor that he was reading *The Masquerader* and suffered from “serious heart trouble . . . and may die any minute. I should deeply regret going without knowing the general end of the story. May I know it? . . . I just felt that (I have had so many troubles) it would be just my luck to die, and not know the end.”⁴¹

To emphasize the trans-national popularity of Thurston’s book is not to suggest that the contexts for her reception were identical across America, Britain, and Australia. While we know that attitudes to cultural hierarchy were very different across these national contexts in the following decades—when the “battle of the brows” raged in the UK in the 1920s and 1930s—this is not the case in relation to Thurston’s reception in the first decade of

the century. Indeed, the assertion of a divide between high and low is more apparent in American discussions of *John Chilcote* than it is in British ones, and Australian newspapers follow the American, rather than the British, example in this respect. British reviews of Thurston's novel are, on the whole, sanguine about its popularity. They note that it will reach a "delighted audience" and be "assured of popularity"⁴² but there is little attempt to distinguish it from other, more serious, forms of fiction.

In newspaper discussions in America and Australia, however, the developing "discourse of the great divide" is apparent in the beginnings of what Q.D. Leavis described as the "curiously inverse relationship" between esteem and popularity that was well in place by the time she was writing in the 1930s.⁴³ *John Chilcote* was positioned by Australian newspapers as representative of a new kind of fiction, and a new and unfortunate mode of reading. The Sydney *Sunday Times*, for example, lists it among a "string of popular works, for which the public are always asking," noting "a general impression that the popular taste in literature has sadly deteriorated since the advent of light, frothy fiction and other ephemeral writing." This is compared, unfavorably, with the literary taste "prevailing in the days when the three volume novel—or 'three-decker'—interested our grandparents." Thurston is firmly situated, here, amongst the new, light, popular fiction, and the mode of "popular reading" it allows: "representative of the present desire for reading of a pleasant and easy type which requires little effort to mentally digest."⁴⁴ Similarly, the Adelaide *Advertiser* aligns Thurston's novel with a body of cheap, ephemeral work to be read in transit: "The story is one of the kind that can be recommended confidently as an antidote to the monotony of a railway or steamship journey, especially to persons who are not in literary matters so pedantic as to object to the presence of three split infinitives in the last chapter."⁴⁵ The Melbourne *Leader* makes a very clear assertion of the novel's status: it is popular, modern, readable and but "that it is in any sense a great novel [the reviewer] cannot pretend to believe."⁴⁶

Nowhere is the contestation over the status of Thurston's work more evident than in the pages of the *New York Times*. This newspaper's review of *The Masqueraders* is one of some fifty individual items about the novel published in the *New York Times* between the novel's publication in 1904 and Thurston's death in 1911. These included letters from readers, reports of the novel's popularity and circulation, reviews of adaptations for the stage, inclusion in lists of "books in demand" from New York Libraries, discussions of alleged plagiarism, gossip about Thurston's life, literary

plans, and divorce, and reports of her death. From these pages emerges a detailed picture of the often contradictory role of the newspaper in mediating literary value in the early twentieth century.

The *New York Times* Saturday book review pages were a site of active contestation and disagreement over the status and worth of Thurston's novel. They featured an extraordinary, six-week long exchange between critic, readers, and editors about *The Masqueraders*. This was an exchange in which the form of newspaper book talk that usually wields the most cultural authority—the review—explicitly situated *The Masquerader* as outside of the realm of the literary and thus not to be taken seriously. Readers then sent a barrage of letters to the newspaper, taking the novel very seriously indeed.

The review's discussion of the literary value of Thurston's work is framed by an acknowledgment of its popularity: it is "one of the books of the hour that will be most talked of." "The whole secret of the inevitable success of 'The Masquerader'," according to the reviewer, is that its author "is a born story-teller, and a story-teller first of all, not a psychologist, or a sociologist, or a moralist, or even a poet. The view of life in 'The Masquerader' is not the poet's view at all."⁴⁷ In focusing on authorship in this way, the review assumes a continuation of the late-Victorian battle asserted by Nigel Cross between the literary "tradesmen" and the "artists" such as James, Meredith, and Gissing.⁴⁸ The only aesthetic grounds on which this distinction is made is the extent to which the plot is liable to incite a certain kind of uncritical reading practice:

the mind of the reader is gradually worked into a state of excitement; he reads eagerly, quickly, impatiently, anxious to know whither the events of the narrative are tending, fascinated by the author's ingenuity, and accepting as entirely probable, for the time being, the strange doings of the principal personages.

This mode of reading, associated with the improbabilities of the romance and the somatic, ungovernable urges of the (usually feminized) reader, is not condemned but clearly asserted as proof that the novel is not to be taken seriously.

The terms in which the novel is dismissed are not aesthetic but moral: it is not Thurston's writing but her "view of life" that renders it beyond the pale of literature proper: "The ethics of 'The Masquerader,' however, are not to be taken very seriously, not more so than the ethics of a Congreve comedy or a picaresque romance." The behaviour of each of the protagonists is con-

demned by the reviewer on moral grounds, “But even to say this much is to take the ethical side of ‘The Masquerader’ too seriously.”

The readers of the *New York Times* proceeded to disagree. From 29 October to 19 November 1904, the *New York Times* Book Review printed some twenty-eight letters from readers arguing the ethical, political, and legal implications of *The Masquerader*. Readers were particularly exercised over the novel’s ending, in which the convenient death by overdose of the morphia-addicted Chilcote opens up a moral conundrum for the nascent love affair between Loder and Chilcote’s wife. They decide to live together as Mr and Mrs Chilcote, and the morality and legality of this arrangement was hotly contested by the readers. “M.W.” from Brooklyn gives Thurston and her protagonists the benefit of the doubt, questioning which jurisdiction could possibly marry them legally. Another, from Nutley, asks what “is their relation before God—and society, too—if the truth were known?”⁴⁹

These readers reveal the letters page to be a space of literary sociability. Mrs William Bridge writes “hoping that I may know through your columns if there are any who think with me, or what they have to say regarding my opinion.”⁵⁰ Readers ask questions of each other (“I merely ask to hear the opinion of someone who knows”) and respond both to the review and to other readers’ letters: “I wish to take issue with the stern moralist . . . who objects in the last number of THE BOOK REVIEW to the ending of ‘The Masquerader.’ I think the ending is most artistic and most satisfying; likewise, I do not think it is immoral.”⁵¹ Sarah de Wolf Gamwell (of Westfield, Mass.) is “delighted to find [her]self in such a whirlpool of varied comment and inquiry.” This whirlpool of comment sits self-consciously within broader debates about how far novels should reflect the real world, and the source of readers’ pleasure in them. E.M. Segrell of Newark admits to being exactly the kind of reader the reviewer seems to be guarding against: “I admit that I have the novel habit; I read a great many current books of fiction. Some of them I like tolerably, some of them I hate intolerably. I always pick up a novel with the hope that it will entertain me. I admit that I read in order to be taken out of myself and carried into a world where the time will pass more pleasantly than it does in this one. . . .”

After two weeks of such letters, the editor felt it necessary to step in and offer some metacommentary on the discussion, noting that the novel had “become the subject of heated controversy” amongst its readers, “either more or less bewildered by its ethical purport or aroused to sarcastic retorts upon others who find moral or intellectual flaws in the book.”⁵² The letters continued, until by 26 November the discussion was closed, with an edito-

rial paragraph claiming that the questions had “worked themselves out” and that, moreover:

a book like “The Masquerader” actually has no ethical purport. It is just a good story. We should as soon think of assigning moral motives to its characters, or of blaming them for immorality, as we should think of so treating the characters in a Restoration comedy or a contemporary detective story. These things, differing greatly in quality and spirit, are alike in this, that they have no relation to the actualities of life.⁵³

This is an explicit assertion of a divide between novels that should be taken seriously—those “of ethical purport”—and those that are for entertainment only and do not have a bearing on “the actualities of life.” This runs directly counter to the stated opinions of many of the newspaper’s readers. Its insistence that “a book like” this should not be taken seriously is an intervention in defining literary realism in relation to “books like” *The Masquerader*, whose popularity has been discussed at length in the newspaper over the preceding period. The *New York Times* is allocating Thurston’s novel a position on the hierarchy of literary value that is, by 1904, associated with genre fiction as exemplified by the detective story, although Thurston’s novel is not clearly marked by any such contemporary genre. In its unstable affiliation with the romance, the sensational, and the new political thriller, *John Chilcote* exemplifies a form of popular fiction which is not “written for, marketed and consumed generically,”⁵⁴ but rather makes its own way in relation to various generic expectations, in ways that we now associate with the literary.

While many American reviews of *The Masquerader* are similar to those in British newspapers in praising the aspects of the novel which would enable it to attract a large readership, it is clear that the *New York Times* set the tone for much of the discussion of Thurston’s novel that was to follow. The uses to which the *NYT*’s review was put, however, suggest a more complicated and less hierarchical way of reading the “discourse of the great divide” in this period.

The *San Francisco Call* ran a lengthy review noting the discussion in the *NYT* and reiterating its editorial:

It is a story, pure and simple, with no ethical significance, no didactic ends to be subserved Despite the fact that already readers have been raising mooted points of ethical contention and moral

conviction anent the author's solution of the puzzle in her novel, the truth remains that this is a story, only, a story to amuse; all speculation concerning the ulterior purpose of the book is decidedly beside the mark, for there is none.⁵⁵

For this reviewer, however, this lack of ulterior purpose has no impact on the value he ascribes to the novel. The review ends by noting that "after reading it one is very likely to be in dissatisfied unrest because of the fact that he will probably go far before finding another bit of fiction so good." This is a form of bifurcation of the literary field that is not necessarily hierarchical, and in which ethical seriousness is disaggregated from literary value. This is also evident in the otherwise puzzling fact that Harper's took the terms of the *NYT* review as the basis for its publicity for the novel. Two weeks after the *New York Times* described Thurston as a "born story-teller" rather than a "poet," Harper's "Book News" ran the following opening:

Most of you who read this have never heard the name of Katherine Cecil Thurston. But the name is going to become well known, very well known. Why? Because she is a born story teller, and there is no way of keeping that kind of thing quiet.⁵⁶

Meyer-Lee defines literary value as produced in the process of ascribing value "to some aspect of its perceived manner."⁵⁷ In these terms, the *New York Times*, the *San Francisco Call*, and Harper's are all registering *The Masquerader* as literary, in ways that are sometimes, but not always, distinguished from other forms of literary value involving ethical seriousness.

These intersecting notions of literary value were being discussed quite explicitly by and in relation to Katherine Thurston. Towards the end of 1904, readers of newspapers and magazines across the English-speaking world were encountering reviews of *John Chilcote* and reports of Thurston's stated opinions in the context of debates about the democratizing of fiction and the nature and readership of the modern novel. The clearest example of this was a statement published in *Book Monthly* in December 1904. Thurston was asked to present her views, as the author of one of the "triumphant novels" of the season, on "the great and growing popularity of fiction with English readers." In a passage that was to attract some notoriety, she writes:

The modern aim, the modern idea—with women as well as with men—is to live at the highest pressure attainable, to compress as much as is humanly reasonable into one lifetime; and the result of

this feverish state of being resolves itself into a periodical and insistent need for distraction from personal concerns. To put the matter very briefly the novel is, to my thinking, a mental “rest cure” in an over-taxed world. We turn to it when our minds are tired, much as we turn to the season, or the mountains, when physically exhausted by an arduous seas—social or commercial.⁵⁸

This claim for the novel’s efficacy as an instant mental sanatorium was widely quoted and became part of a number of different arguments about the popular novel. *The Library World* inserts it into the debate about the justification for public funding of libraries, given the high rates of fiction borrowing within them. It presents Thurston’s comments as a plea “for fiction reading which may well be quoted when the popularity of novels is so often made a text for the disparagement of Public Libraries.”⁵⁹ Newspapers in Britain, America, Australia, and New Zealand reprinted Thurston’s comments as a piece of “News of the Book World,” “a new reason for the popularity of fiction.”⁶⁰

Thurston’s comments were also used as evidence in the case against the democratization of the novel, most influentially in *The Academy and Literature*. William Teignmouth Shore takes Thurston’s comments as confirmation of his belief that “amusement, not art, was the popular cry” a propos of the novel. If Thurston’s statement

holds good without reserve, then the knell of the novel as a form of art is already rung, and in its stead we have the novel as an intellectual recuperator Judged by Mrs Thurston’s standard, Mr. James’ “The Wings of the Dove” or Mr. Pinero’s “The Second Mrs. Tanqueray” must be very poor specimens of the novel and of the drama; and I have nothing but the sincerest pity for the unlucky individual who has recourse to either the one or the other in order to refresh his jaded and exhausted brain. Surely a novel which is worth anything at all should afford exercise not rest, should be food for a vigorous mind, not a mere medicine for the exhausted.⁶¹

Here we see terms in which the “great divide” would be defined thereafter being brought to bear in relation to Thurston’s comments—art versus entertainment, difficulty versus ease—with James (as had already become standard) an exemplar of the former in both cases.

In the *Book Monthly*, in passages not quoted in other periodicals, Thurston takes pains to qualify her comments: “And in saying this, I cast no reflection upon the many gifted men and women who use the novel as a

medium for expressing their ideas; for it may reasonably be admitted that we are more likely to be brought into touch with what is high and fine during our temporary respites—mental or physical—than when harassed by the stress of personal endeavour.”⁶² She is setting out a space for the novel as a form of encounter with the “high and fine”—terms which have both moral and aesthetic resonance in this period—without this encounter necessarily being characterized by difficulty.

She is also treading a very careful line between the key terms of realism and romance. She notes the importance of the novel in providing a record of contemporary life, but in doing so,

not bearing in mind the novels of imagination, or the novels of imaginary incident, that live their hour strenuously, and then cease to exist. I am recalling the many careful, conscientious psychological novels that have been given us by thoughtful writers of our own generation—novels in which the social life, of which each one of us knows himself to be a unit, is faithfully depicted by a mind trained to observe.⁶³

Seen in this light, Thurston appears to be positioning the realist novel as both responding to and recording modern life, and staking an uncertain claim for a kind of novel that is not the romance of the hour, but can still provide respite from the rigors of the modern world (which is how the romance was more often described): that can express ideas and be a “careful and conscientious” record of the times, yet still entertain. Her emphasis on the faithful observation of modern life, rather than “imaginary incident,” intervenes in disagreements about aestheticism, decadence, romance and realism that exercised her reviewers then and her few scholarly critics since.⁶⁴ Unlike the eminently quotable “novel as rest-cure,” this more qualified claim for a novel of in-between status did not circulate more widely.

The Book of the Hour

As is evident from the *New York Times* review, underpinning the deliberations on Thurston’s novel is Ruskin’s influential maxim: “All books can be divisible into two classes: the books of the hour and books for all time.”⁶⁵ This phrase became a commonplace throughout newspaper book talk well into the twentieth century, heading articles and lists of popular works,

bookseller and library advertisements, and featuring in reviews and general discussions about “the fiction problem,” working to distinguish between the classic and the fashionable. The critic seeking to put his weight behind an author would stake a claim for whether, in Ruskin’s words, a novel is “worth keeping or not.”

Temporality was thus one of the notions structuring the emerging sense of literary distinction in this period, and Thurston’s novel was clearly defined as the novel of the season/hour/year. In *Book Monthly* Thurston allies herself against the novels “that live their hour strenuously, and then cease to exist,”⁶⁶ and at first glance *John Chilcote* would seem to have done exactly that. However, the popularity of *John Chilcote* stretched well beyond its season of publication in 1904. By the end of 1905, the book reviewer from the *Colac Herald* was so weary of Thurston’s novel he was having nightmares about it.⁶⁷ In 1907, the character remains well known enough to be the model for an easily put-together costume for a “Literary Ball” in Brisbane.⁶⁸ In 1910, the London correspondent for the Hobart *Mercury* assumes that “Every novel reader has heard of ‘John Chilcote, M.P.’”⁶⁹ Perhaps the best index of its continuing popularity in the Australian context is that in Australian newspapers, “John Chilcote” was shorthand for news stories of doubled, mistaken, or impersonated identity until at least 1915.⁷⁰

In the American context, the season of *The Masquerader* was sustained for nearly a decade in the pages of what Amy Blair describes as “the most widely circulated, most influential women’s lifestyle magazine of the early twentieth century,” the *Ladies’ Home Journal*.⁷¹ Thurston’s novel formed part of “the Mabie Canon”—the books most often recommended by the journal’s influential reading advice columnist, Hamilton Wright Mabie. Over the decade of his columns, *The Masquerader* is mentioned more often than *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The House of Mirth*, or *Robinson Crusoe*. Mabie’s “canon” is more social than consecrating; Blair notes that Mabie’s inclusion of Thurston’s novels is part of his willingness to recommend to his readers works that are “books of the hour” rather than those “for all time,” and that orient towards respectability rather than literary hierarchy. Blair’s reading of Mabie presents him as troubling or at least thoroughly blurring distinctions between high and low, realism and romance, and his recommendations echo and reflect the eclecticism of readers’ tastes in this period as indicated by library loan records and best-seller lists.

This popularity was sustained and amplified into the 1930s by a means very common to popular novels in this period: adaptation. *John Chilcote* was first adapted for the stage (with a more virtuous ending) by Thurston’s hus-

band, E. Temple Thurston, in 1905, to mild criticism and a not very successful run.⁷² It was adapted again, this time by “American adaptor” Hunter Booth (and under the US title, *The Masquerader*), with star American actor Guy Bates Post, and playing successfully across Australia in 1918 and 1925, and New Zealand in 1926. The successful adaptation brought the novel’s political action up-to-date: instead of taking place before the outbreak of the Boer War, the play’s political crises play out across the beginnings of the First World War.⁷³ In this way Thurston’s narrative becomes the story of another, later, hour and season. By the time Australian audiences were going to see Bates Post in the production’s second run, in 1925, many would have already seen the silent film adaptation, directed by James Young and also starring Guy Bates Post in his screen debut, released in 1922. *The Masquerader* was a simultaneous “screen and stage” success, claimed to be “the biggest event in screen and theatrical history of 1922.”⁷⁴ Ten years later, a Hollywood production of *The Masquerader* (this time with sound), with scenes filmed in the British House of Commons, was released, directed by Richard Wallace and starring Ronald Colman. The international popularity—and dubious literary status—of Thurston’s novel was regularly mentioned in the substantial body of newspaper commentary about these adaptations.⁷⁵ *John Chilcote/The Masquerader* remained in print with Blackwood, Harper, and Grosset and Dunlap until at least 1922. But, less than a decade later, the *Liverpool Post* and the *Queenslander* can list Thurston, along with Corelli and Mrs Humphrey Ward, as proof of “how little relation there really is between the best-seller and literature.” In 1931, these writers are “merely names today, or less than names.”⁷⁶ A “novel for all time” it may not have been, but *John Chilcote* enjoyed an “hour” of popularity that lasted for at least two decades.

In looking back on the furore over *The Masquerader* that took place in the pages of the *New York Times*, Hamilton Wright Mabie identifies the key point of contention as the notion of seriousness:

The serious discussion as to its morality or immorality which went on for some time in the columns of a New York newspaper must have given the author, if it came under her notice, immense amusement. It was a case of taking a book too seriously.⁷⁷

That Mabie writes this in the context of his own repeated recommendations of the novel indicates the shifting scale of value accorded to seriousness in discussions of literature in this period. Thurston was well aware of this, as is apparent in *John Chilcote* itself. At one point in the novel Loder is taken

by Chilcote's mistress to see a play, adapted from a novel about two men who are identical:

"What's your idea of the play, Lillian?" he said abruptly. To his own ears there was a note of challenge in his voice.

She looked round languidly. "Oh, it's quite amusing," she said. "It makes a delicious farce—absolutely French."

"French?"

"Quite! Don't you think so, Lennie?"

"Oh, quite!" Kaine agreed.

"They mean that it's so very light, and yet so very subtle, Mr Chilcote," Mary Esseltyn explained.

"Indeed?" he said. "Then my imagination was at fault. I thought the piece was serious."

"Serious!" Lillian smiled. "Why, where's your sense of humour? The motive of the play debarb seriousness."

Loder looked down at the programme still between his hands.

"What is the motive?" he asked.

Lillian waved her fan once or twice, then closed it softly. "Love is the motive," she said.⁷⁸

John Chilcote is a novel well aware of its indeterminate status, and it explicitly situates itself in relation to discussions about prestige, distinction and value, centered upon the opposition of "lightness" and "seriousness" (a distinction that has been applied to literary works since the seventeenth century). The aspect of the novel which the *New York Times* readers took most seriously was the resolution of the love affair between Loder and Eve Chilcote because of the way in which it raised questions of legality, ethics, and subjecthood. That critics insisted upon the novel's lack of seriousness could be an indication of the "discourse of the great divide" at work. It can also, however, be an indication of the intersecting modes of literary value at work in relation to popular fiction in this period.

John Chilcote, M.P. was a remarkably popular novel in the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century. It was popular in the sense that it was purchased from booksellers and borrowed in libraries, but the kind of popularity that this essay has been most interested in is the sense in which the popularity of this novel was talked about, generated, and negotiated in the pages of the periodical press. Borrowing the language of the *New York Times* for a moment, a "book like" *John Chilcote* becomes popular through a great many acts of mediation, a process which this essay continues. But *John Chilcote* is, as I hope to have shown, not easily produced as

“a popular novel” through the kinds of scholarly mediation that define the popular as “the opposite of Literature.” In some aspects of its reception the novel was produced as exemplifying a new, light, popular form of fiction intended to be distinguished from older and newer kinds of serious literature. At the same time, the aspects of the novel that enabled it to reach an extensive readership—both in terms of its publication and circulation, and the manner in which it was written—were produced as evidence of its value as literature, despite (or even because) of its apparent lack of seriousness. There was, in short, little consensus over its worth or status. It was light, yet subtle. Thrilling, yet ingenious. *John Chilcote* is a popular novel, but the nature of that popularity was, and is, anything but clear-cut.

Notes

1. *Academy and Literature*, February 24, 1906, 181.
2. *John Chilcote, M.P.* was published in America as *The Masquerader* (New York: Harper, 1904). Throughout this paper the novel will be referred to as *John Chilcote* except when specifically referring to the American edition.
3. Ken Gelder, *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 12.
4. Franco Moretti, “The Slaughterhouse of Literature,” *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2000): 207–27; Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 23.
5. Gelder, *Popular Fiction*, 11.
6. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986).
7. H. Walpole, *Tendencies of the Modern Novel* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1967), 17.
8. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, viii.
9. Andrew McCann, *Popular Literature, Authorship and the Occult in Late Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 4.
10. Lise Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon: the Modern Library Series, 1917–1955* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 10–11.
11. The middlebrow, as it has come to be defined especially in American and Australian scholarship, is not the sole or even the most appropriate framework through which to understand these boundary cases. They were mediated by some of the institutions that would come to shape middlebrow culture—public and subscription libraries, newspaper and magazine book talk—but they are very difficult to fit within any self-improving or status-seeking mode of reading, because of their self-awareness and their ambiguous morality.
12. Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity and Literary Culture Between the Wars* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 7.
13. David A. Brewer, “Counting, Resonance, and Form, A Speculative Manifesto (with Notes),” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 24, no. 2 (Winter 2011–12): 168.
14. Moretti, “Slaughterhouse,” 209.
15. Stephen J. Meyer-Lee, “Toward a Theory and Practice of Literary Valuing,” *New Literary History* 46, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 336.

16. www.trove.nla.gov.au
17. For example, at the Lambton Mechanics' Institute in New South Wales, Australia, between 1905 and 1910 *John Chilcote* was read in common with muckraking journalist David Graham Phillips's Washington romance, *The Fashionable Adventures of Joshua Craig* (1909), and a collection of satirical stories by Australian bush realist "Steele Rudd" (A.H. Davis), *Dad in Politics* (1908). These novels were actively engaged in negotiating a question key to their own cultural status: the relationship between cultural, social, political, and economic elites, and the masses from which they were distinguished.
18. David McKitterick, *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain Volume 6: 1830–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 73.
19. *The Scotsman*, December 26, 1904, 7.
20. *The Scotsman*, December 26, 1904, 7.
21. "News Notes," *Bookman* (London) 27, no. 162 (March 1905).
22. "Advertising," *Mercury* (Hobart), December 8, 1904, 4. See also Paul Eggert, "Robbery Under Arms: The Colonial Market, Imperial Publishers, and the Demise of the Three-Decker Novel," *Book History* 6 (2003): 127–46.
23. "Advertising," *Geelong Advertiser*, July 24, 1907, 3.
24. Harper was successfully granted an injunction against another American firm, Donohue, who had published a pirated edition of the novel on the grounds that Blackwood had failed to append the US copyright notice to its editions of the novel. See "Books and Bookmen," *Manchester Guardian*, April 21, 1906, 7.
25. *The Bookman* (London) November 2004–April 1905.
26. *The Bookman: An Illustrated Magazine of Literature and Life* (New York) 20 (September 1904 – February 1905), 21 (March – August 1905). It dropped to second on the list in February, and fourth in March. It remained on the top six lists for individual states from April to June, then dropped off the lists altogether.
27. Laura J. Miller, "The Best-Seller List as Marketing Tool and Historical Fiction," *Book History* 3 (2000), 289.
28. See e.g. *San Francisco Call*, May 14, 1905, 23.
29. From November 1904 to February 1905 *John Chilcote, M.P.* ranked first or second in demand according to booksellers in London, Liverpool, Sheffield, Cardiff, Glasgow,ournemouth, Bristol, Bath, Aberdeen, Cheltenham, and Edinburgh. *Academy and Literature*, November 12, 1904, 442–444; December 10, 1904, 578–9; February 11, 1905, 114–5. The *New York Tribune* in November 1904 ranks *The Masquerader* third in its list of "What New York Booksellers Say They Are Selling Most," November 28, 1904, 8.
30. See e.g. "Books in Demand," *New York Times*, December 31, 1904.
31. *The Masquerader* was included in the "Best Books of 1904" as voted for by "librarians and other persons" to guide recommendations for small libraries. *New York Times*, June 17, 1905.
32. See e.g. "What People Are Reading," *Sunday Times* (Sydney), October 7, 1906, 7; "The Literature of 1904," *Western Mail* (Perth), February 4, 1905, 50.
33. Troy Bassett and Christina Walker note that the best-seller lists in *The Bookman* "refused to acknowledge the proliferation of sixpenny novels. . . . The bulk of the list, perhaps in accordance with the wholesaler's financially motivated bias, was reserved for more expensive books, with one shilling to two shillings the lowest price considered." Thus these lists, they note, "perhaps seriously underrepresent the sales of cheap fiction." Troy J. Bassett and Christina M. Walter, "Booksellers and Bestsellers: British Book Sales as Documented by 'The Bookman,' 1891–1906," *Book History* 4 (2001): 221. The books listed in the *New York Bookman* over the period of *The Masquerader's* popularity were usually priced at \$1.50, or occasionally at one dollar. The best-selling fiction in the *London Bookman* was listed under the heading "Six Shilling Novels," a designation that included James' *The Golden Bowl* as well as more obviously popular works such as those by E. Phillips Oppenheim.

34. Ellen Gruber-Garvey, "Ambivalent Advertising: Books, Prestige and the Circulation of Publicity," in *A History of the Book in America. Vol 4: Print in Motion: The Expansion of Publishing and Reading in the United States, 1880-1940*, ed. Carl K. Kaestle and Janice A. Radway (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 172.

35. Christine Pawley, *Reading on the Middle Border: The Culture of Print in Late-nineteenth-century Osage, Iowa, 1860-1900* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 61.

36. McKitterick, *Cambridge History*, 21.

37. The *New York Times* reported in December 1904 that "The popularity of 'The Masquerader' has been variously attested. The latest witness lies in the announcement of the publishers, the Harpers, that a new set of electrotype plates has been made for the book, the numerous editions of the past six weeks having worn out the original set" (*New York Times*, December 3, 1904). The following week, in a snippet of the advertorial bent, it is reported that "'Four volumes a minute' is the latest claim made for the sales of Mrs Thurston's 'Masquerader.' Messrs Harper & Brothers' calculators have figured it out at that for the past few days" (*New York Times*, December 10, 1904). Six months later, the popularity of *The Masquerader* is still news: the NYT reported "another large printing" of the novel, as well as its translation into Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish (*New York Times*, April 22, 1905; *New York Times*, June 24, 1905).

38. *Register* (Des Moines), November 13, 1904.

39. *New York Times*, December 22, 1904.

40. *The World's News* (Sydney) November 26, 1904; *The World's News* (Sydney), March 25, 1905.

41. See e.g. "Lady Novelist's Sudden Death," *The Daily News* (Perth), October 16, 1911. This letter to the editor was used by Harper to advertise the novel, see e.g. *New-York Tribune*, October 30, 1904.

42. "Novel Notes," *Bookman* (London), November 1904, 90; "New Novels," *Manchester Guardian*, April 15, 1908, 5.

43. Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932), 34.

44. *Sunday Times* (Sydney), October 7, 1906.

45. "LITERATURE," *Advertiser* (Adelaide), November 19, 1904, 13.

46. "The Novels of 1904," *Leader* (Melbourne), February 11, 1905.

47. "A Pair of Chilcotes," *New York Times*, October 15, 1904.

48. Nigel Cross, *The Common Writer: Life in Nineteenth Century Grub Street* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1985), 205. Cited in McCann, *Popular Literature*, 34.

49. *New York Times*, October 29, 1904.

50. *New York Times*, November 12, 1904.

51. *New York Times*, November 5, 1904.

52. *New York Times*, November 5, 1904.

53. *New York Times*, November 26, 1904.

54. Gelder, *Popular Fiction*, 40.

55. *The San Francisco Call*, November 20, 1904.

56. "Harper's Book News," *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 29, 1904, 4.

57. Meyer-Lee, "Towards," 340.

58. Katherine Thurston, "Fiction As a 'Rest-Cure': Mrs Katherine Cecil Thurston On the Popularity of the Novel," *Book Monthly* 3, no. 2 (December 1904), 160.

59. "By-the-way Notes," *Library World* 7, no. 7 (1905): 168-200.

60. "The Uneasy Chair," *Minneapolis Journal*, December 30, 1904, 14; "Literature," *The West Australian*, February 8, 1905; "Literary Notes," *Otago Witness*, March 1, 1905, 81.

61. William Teignmouth Shore, "Notes," *The Academy and Literature*, December 17, 1904, 605-6.

62. Thurston, "Fiction As a 'Rest-Cure.'"
63. Thurston, "Fiction As a 'Rest-Cure.'"
64. The two critics who have considered Thurston's work at any length—Gerardine Meaney and Alison Harvey—disagree over the value of her most "realist" novel, *The Fly on The Wheel*. See Alison Harvey, "Irish Aestheticism in Fin-de-Siècle Women's Writing: Art, Realism and the Nation," *Modernism/Modernity* 21, no.3 (September 2014): 821.
65. John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies: Two Lectures Delivered at Manchester in 1864* (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1865), 16.
66. Thurston, "Fiction As a 'Rest-Cure.'"
67. "A Reviewer's Nightmare," *Colac Herald*, March 31, 1905, 8.
68. "Literary Ball," *Queenslander*, July 6, 1907, 13.
69. "'Romance' in Real Life: The Divorce Problem," *Mercury* (Hobart), May 13, 1910.
70. For example, the case in Rome in 1905 of "eccentric nobleman" Count Adriano Beniculli, who was identical to his valet, whom he called upon to impersonate him at social functions and who went on to have an affair with his wife. *Braidwood Dispatch and Mining Journal*, December 9, 1905, 4. Or the "amazing story" told to a Willenden magistrate, of a woman who was certain that the man who had been living with her as her husband, "remarkably like him, only stouter" was an imposter. *West Gippsland Gazette*, April 9, 1907. Or the Parisian man whose wife's sister took her place without him noticing. "Chilcote in Real Life," *World's News* (Sydney), August 5, 1905, 15.
71. Amy Blair, *Reading Up: Middle-class Readers and the Culture of Success in the Early Twentieth-century United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 5.
72. See, for example, "London Theatres," *Advertiser* (Adelaide), June 6, 1905, 8; "John Chilcote, M.P.," *Scotsman*, May 2, 1905, 5.
73. According to the *Keyneton Guardian*, "The story of the play opens at the period of the Hun's invasion of Belgium, and Chilcote is the member whose stirring speech was expected to fire the Asquith Government with the spirit of warfare, and he it was who was later to be regarded as the suggesting spirit and the actual promoter of the Department of Munitions" (May 9, 1918).
74. "Monarch Pictures," *Muswellbrook Chronicle*, June 22, 1923.
75. For example, a column about the 1905 stage play is described as "an adaptation of the popular novel by Mrs Thurston, called 'John Chilcote, M.P.,' which, on account of its striking story, rather than by reason of any virtues of style, has enjoyed a great success." "John Chilcote, M.P.," *Scotsman*, May 2, 1905, 5.
76. "Former 'Best Sellers'," *Queenslander*, April 30, 1931, 56.
77. *The Ladies' Home Journal*, September 1905, 18.
78. Katherine Cecil Thurston, *John Chilcote, M.P.* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1905), 325.