Beds for Two
Joe Orton's and Kenneth Halliwell's Bedsit

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Joe Orton in his Noel Road bedsit, photographed for *The Sun* in 1964.
Courtesy of Mirrorpix.

When the gothic novelist Bram Stoker wrote, "Sleep has no place it can call its own,"[1] he was perhaps not referring to the material conditions of sleep, but conjuring a distinct, unsettling, and peculiar horror: the sense of solitude that even sleep could not afford—a longed-for state that, in the early decades of the twentieth century, was beginning to acquire new significance. At this time, two seemingly unrelated developments were gaining prominence: living alone and, more unexpectedly, sleeping alone. These phenomena signaled a profound transformation in the structures of domestic life, catalyzing the emergence of not only speculative types of housing but also new forms of intimacy that redefined conventional sleeping arrangements. Among the most telling examples are the *bed-sit*—a type of British affordable housing in which a single room (usually) served multiple domestic functions besides rest—and the *twin-bed* system, in which couples shared a room but not a bed. Both the bedsit and the twin-bed system are symptomatic of a broader tension in modern society: the oscillation between the desire for individual autonomy and the inescapable, collective nature of human existence. The twin-bed system, on the one hand, emphasized the autonomy of rest within couples. The bedsit, on the other, much like various housing solutions of the era designed to accommodate the migration of workers into sprawling cities, provided a temporary or permanent pathway for those seeking independence outside the boundaries of normative kinship structures. Nowhere is the intersection of the two—and the ways they mediated everyday life—more vividly staged than in the Islington bedsit of playwright Joe Orton and his partner, the actor and collagist Kenneth Halliwell. Their bedsit, with its two single beds that physically separated the couple during nightly repose, invites an alternative narrative—one that foregrounds the marginalized lived experiences of those outside the institution of marriage, especially at a time when heterosexuality managed to disguise itself as the only natural

1 Bram Stoker, Chapter 23 in *Dracula* (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Company, 1897).

and complete form of romance.[2] Since their tragic deaths in 1967—when Halliwell murdered Orton and then took his own life—the couple has attracted considerable scholarly interest, particularly from cultural historians who have examined their domestic arrangement in depth.[3] Yet, their shared life is often regarded as one that is not easily 'domesticated,' largely because of Orton's transgressive work, which parodied middle-class home and family life—values that, though deeply rooted, were being increasingly challenged during the 1960s. Had Halliwell taken Orton's life four years earlier, their deaths would have likely gone unnoticed in the local news. Instead, they became front-page headlines. In the span of just four years—from the acceptance of his first play for production in 1963 to his death—Orton rose quickly to international acclaim. While his body of work was limited, its impact was undeniably significant. By the very year of his passing, the term *Ortonesque* had entered the English lexicon, shorthand for scenes defined by macabre absurdity. Among his works, Orton authored three full-length plays—*Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, *Loot*, and the posthumously released *What the Butler Saw*—alongside four one-act plays. During his brief but remarkable career, two of his works were adapted into films, and *Loot* earned the *Evening Standard*'s Best Play of 1966 award, firmly establishing his reputation in both theater and popular culture.[4]

Orton's public success on stage was mirrored by a meticulous record in his diaries, where he documented his sexual and creative life with remarkable candor. Terms such as *queer*, *homosexual*, and *gay* recur frequently, and they also appear in his plays, though their meaning shifts depending on social and narrative circumstances.[5] In *The Ruffian on the Stair*, for example, a character asks, "Are you queer?" [6]—a query that, within the context of the play, may simply denote unusual or peculiar behavior. Similarly, in *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, a character remarks, "You'll find yourself in queer street,"[7] where the term is deployed metaphorically to indicate financial distress or marginalization. This essay, however, approaches these terms as historically situated constructs shaped by specific social and political conditions, while remaining attentive to the evolution of their meanings over time. The distinctions among them have a complex history, particularly since the 1990s, greatly shaped by the scholarship of Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky, and David Halperin, to name just a few. In contemporary usage, *queer* is understood less as a fixed category of self-identification and more as a performative register through which norms that organize gender, sexuality, and intersecting forms of social difference—including race and class—are subverted. It signals a refusal of the frameworks that sustain heteronormativity and other forms of social regulation, arising from the impossibility—or unwillingness—of cohering within the disciplinary constraints of a singular, definitive identity category—a stance that perhaps echoes the rebellious, non-conforming ethos present in Orton's work and in his shared life with Halliwell.[8]

At the root of this inquiry lies, among other considerations, an effort to untangle the horizontal architecture of the bed and the forms of agency it affords its occupants—not merely as an architectural concern, but as something deeply embedded in social and political significance. To ascribe the persistence of both the bedsit and the twin-bed system solely to heteronormative logic would risk a reductive interpretation. This study therefore adopts a queer perspective, drawing on insights from queer

2 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Duke University Press, 1994), 10–11.

3 See, for instance, the work of Matt Cook who has written both about Joe Orton's archive and the relationship between the couple's companionship and their domestic setting. Among his most prominent works are: Matt Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London* (New York and Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and Matt Cook, "Orton in the Archives," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 66 (2008): 163–179.

4 John Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton* (Middlesex: Penguin Books: 1980 [1978]), 3–4.

5 Read more about the evolution of the term *queer* in William Benjamin Turner, *A Genealogy of Queer Theory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

6 Joe Orton, "The Ruffian on the Stair," *Joe Orton: The Complete Plays*, ed. John Lahr (New York: Grove Press, 1976), 36.

7 Joe Orton, "Entertaining Mr. Sloane," *Joe Orton: The Complete Plays*, ed. John Lahr (New York: Grove Press, 1976), 118.

8 Stephen Farrier, "Sticky Stories: Joe Orton, Queer History, Queer Dramaturgy," *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, vol. 37, no. 2 (2017): 185.

scholarship to reconsider the inextricable relationship between these domestic artifacts and subjectivity. In doing so, it focuses on the living and sleeping arrangements of two homosexual men, deliberately shifting attention away from the more commonly discussed public sphere, where cruising areas typically dominate discussions of affection and intimacy in homosexual relationships.[9] Instead, by drawing upon a diverse range of materials—including an interview with Orton's sister, Leonie Orton, granted for the purposes of this research, along with diaries, letters, plays, media documentation, and photographs—the study delves into how the couple's type of dwelling and its interior arrangement ultimately defied and unsettled the prevailing norms of cohabitation and domesticity. Even today, debates surrounding masculinity, non-traditional homemaking practices, and 'families of choice' are often framed by present-day cultural tropes, reinforcing rather than challenging dominant ideological frameworks.[10] These tropes, however, obscure the historically contingent relationships between homosexuality, domesticity, and kinship—relationships that have shaped the very terrain on which such discourses now unfold. While scholarly attention has increased, homosexual men and women continue to be depicted as inhabiting a 'twilight world,' overshadowed by a persistent sense of loneliness. Yet, as the lives of Orton and Halliwell demonstrate, these melancholic narratives were neither universal nor inevitable. Even within the spatial and social constraints of bedsit living, homosexual relationships in mid-twentieth-century Britain could endure, adapt, and flourish.[11]

To explore these dynamics, this essay will first trace the origins of the twin-bed system and the subsequent evolution of the bedsit. It will then move to the couple's everyday life and their relationship with their bed-sitting room, concluding with a reflection on how both the bedsit and the twin-bed system permeated and influenced Joe Orton's literary work. Beyond the couple's 'malicious' reputation,[12] what insights can we draw from the case of Orton and Halliwell's home? How did their use of the bed-sitting room and its interior arrangement subvert the traditional role of the bedroom as a symbol of heteronormative aspirations? Furthermore, how did their work and life trajectory challenge the prevailing ideas of modern love in mid-twentieth-century Britain, exposing the contradictions and tensions within societal expectations around intimacy, companionship, and desire?

THE SLEEP DIVORCE

One could contend that as the bedroom came to be recognized as a universal necessity for each member of a household, the practice of sleeping in separate beds naturally followed. Over time, however, this practice extended to the intimate confines of the marital bedroom. It was in 1892 that

9 It is important to recognize that while metropolitan cities often compensated for the inadequate domestic functions of other types of speculative housing, bedsits were distinctive in providing a degree of self-sufficiency. American residential hotels, particularly rooming houses that accommodated the working class, emerged in the early twentieth century and typically featured only a single bedroom, devoid of amenities or services. Therefore, the rooming houses' interior arrangement encouraged their inhabitants to cultivate a dependent relationship with their neighborhoods. Read more about the rooming house in Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

10 While manhood has always existed in some form, its definition remains ambiguous. Its history is punctuated by moments of rupture—periods where its coherence is questioned, leading several gender theorists to argue that masculinity is, by its very nature, always in crisis. Twentieth-century Britain, it has been suggested, serves as one of the many stages where multiple, often-conflicting models of manhood emerged, each contending for prominence against a backdrop of shifting social and political dynamics. In tracing this evolution, Ben Griffin, building on the theoretical scaffolding of R. W. Connell, contends that "there are hierarchies between masculinities, with some achieving a normative or 'hegemonic' status, while others are subordinated, marginalised, or moved into positions of either complicity or resistance relative to the normative model. These hierarchies are constructed by shifting sets of cultural norms relating to (among other things) sexuality and intimacy, physique and bodily capacity, and emotional control. These qualities are articulated through repertoires of cultural models that constitute recognised ways of being a man." Read more in Ben Griffin, "Perceptions of Crisis in the History Masculinity: Power and Change in Modern Britain," in *Men and Masculinity in Modern Britain: A History for the Present*, ed., Matt Houlbrook, Katie Jones, and Ben Mechen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023), 158–178.

11 Mark Armstrong, "The Bedsit" in *Queering the Interior*, ed., Andrew Gorman-Murray and Matt Cook (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 111.

12 This is a reference to the book title by Ilsa Colsell, *Malicious Damage: The Defaced Library Books of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton* (London: Donlon Books, 2013).

the *Yorkshire Herald* confidently predicted the permanence of twin beds, foreseeing their eventual prevalence in all shared bedrooms: "The twin-bed seems to have come to stay, and will no doubt in time succeed the double bed in all rooms occupied by two persons." This prescient assertion proved strikingly ahead of its time, for twin beds were still regarded as a novelty in both Britain and the United States. Yet, by the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the press had begun to document their growing popularity, not only through social commentary but also through advertisements that visually reinforced their appeal. Among the most prominent was Messrs Watts and Co., who regularly featured "The New Twin Bedsteads" within their extensive range of iron and brass beds. Their advertisements positioned twin beds as a hallmark of modern domestic refinement. The widespread appeal of these paired single beds was soon confirmed by numerous newspapers, which noted that they had become both fashionable and emblematic of social standing. By the 1920s, the single-bed system had evolved from novelty to norm, effectively realizing the *Herald*'s early forecast. Domestic manuals such as *The Complete Household Adviser* boldly claimed that "Single Beds (3 feet wide) are now the rule in most houses." This claim gained further traction in the following decade. *The Home of To-day* asserted that "Single beds are now almost universally the custom," while the *Manchester Guardian* commented on "the tendency to replace double beds by two single ones." Taken together, such accounts reflected not merely the normalization of twin beds, but the broader redefinition of the marital bedroom, as this arrangement moved beyond the middle and upper classes to be increasingly embraced as both practical and affordable.[13]

If we regard the twin-bed system—a defining feature of mid-twentieth-century heterosexual married life—as the most intriguing aspect of Joe Orton's and Kenneth Halliwell's sleeping arrangement, it raises an important question: What factors contributed to the popularity of this configuration? The twin-bed system began gaining momentum in the late nineteenth century, largely due to medical advocacy. Dr. Benjamin Ward Richardson, a British physician, anesthetist, and physiologist, emerged as its key advocate. In a series of articles titled "Health at Home" for the periodical *Good Words*, Richardson significantly shaped public discourse on domestic hygiene and its impact on public health.[14] Before germ theory gained prominence, the now-obsolete miasma theory suggested that diseases were transmitted through the air. As a firm proponent of this earlier belief, Richardson contended that, even with the widespread practice of bed-sharing in Europe, maintaining personal space during sleep was crucial for fostering a healthy nocturnal environment.[15] The practice of sleeping apart found robust support among scientists, including Dr. Edwin Bowers, a proponent of alternative medicine and author of the 1920s book *Sleeping for Health*. Bowers asserted that "The practice of sleeping in separate beds, adopted in most modern households, is one of the most health-bringing reforms humanity has ever instituted."[16] He further elaborated on this matter, stating that "separate beds for every sleeper are as necessary as are separate dishes for every eater. They promote comfort, cleanliness, and the natural delicacy that exists among human beings. Sleep becomes more relaxing, and therefore more constructive-next to consciousness itself, the most wonderful and healthful thing in life."[17] By the close of the nineteenth century, however, twin beds were chosen not solely for their supposed health benefits but increasingly as a matter of design choice and style.[18] Initially referred to by Dr. Richardson as the "single bed system," the term "twin beds" became more widely used in both Britain and the United States by the 1890s to describe these separat-

13 Hilary Hinds, *A Cultural History of Twin Beds* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 10–12.
14 Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton*, 25.
15 Hinds, *A Cultural History of Twin Beds*, 42.
16 Dr. Edwin Bowers is quoted in Hilary Hinds, *A Cultural History of Twin Beds* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 72.
17 Hinds, *A Cultural History of Twin Beds*, 73.
18 Ibid., 73.

ed marital beds. Their introduction into the 1895 Heal's catalogue established them as a distinct furniture category, while coverage in leading art magazines such as *The Studio* and the *Magazine of Art* further reinforced their status as a modern domestic innovation.[19] It was not long before they were showcased on the international stage, appearing in exhibitions such as the Paris Expositions of 1900 and 1925. In the decades that followed, established architects and designers—including Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Betty Joel, Wells Coates, Le Corbusier, and Frank Lloyd Wright—integrated this modern sleeping arrangement into their plans, reflecting the evolving cultural tendencies of their time.[20]

Reconstruction of the interior of Houses 14 and 15, Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, Weissenhof Estate, Stuttgart, 1927.
Drawn by the author.

Despite the eventual discrediting of health myths surrounding separate sleeping arrangements of couples, many people remained firm believers. Even during the economic hardships of the 1930s, twin beds retained their allure. Their spread into more modest households was facilitated by hire-purchase schemes and the speculative nature of post-war housing development. Media reports continued to corroborate the preference for twin beds over double beds,[21] and prominent figures like Juanita Frances, a leading feminist campaigner and founder of the Married Women's Association, as well as Regina Reynolds, a satirical poet and left-wing commentator, among others, lent their voices in support. While Frances emphasized their comfort and aesthetic appeal, Reynolds questioned their ability to alleviate the dreariness of modern life. Reynolds advocated for

19 Ibid., 90–91.
20 Ibid., 96.
21 Ibid., 13–15.

personal space during nightly repose, highlighting the strain imposed by sharing a bed. [22] On a different note, others opposed such sleeping arrangements, arguing that the choice of twin beds over double beds indicated underlying marital issues. It is no coincidence that this type of sleeping arrangement is also known as the *sleep divorce*, echoing these concerns.[23]

THE LAND OF BEDSITTERS

Indeed, the rise of the twin bed system represented a transition to alternative sleeping arrangements and a subtle architectural rethinking of intimacy, privacy, and the body. As Hilary Hinds demonstrated in *A Cultural History of Twin Beds*, the bedroom became a site of negotiation, where the boundaries of marriage were constantly tested and redrawn. Yet, even as these arrangements reshaped earlier dynamics of companionship, the imperative to uphold the nuclear family remained strong. Despite a plethora of theories concerning the sleeping practices of married couples,[24] the mid-twentieth century unmistakably marked a period of unparalleled emphasis on the home, both symbolically and materially. This emphasis built upon developments already underway during the interwar years, including the expansion of suburban housing, the rise of domestic consumer goods, and magazines that celebrated the virtues of family life. In the postwar period, these trends coalesced into a widespread cultural ideal: the 'perfect' home, a standard that, in practice, was often more aspirational than attainable.[25] Marriage rates experienced a remarkable surge, with far more people marrying than in the previous half-century. For instance, in England, by 1951, three-quarters of men aged 25 to 34 were married, compared to just over half in 1921.[26] Marriage, as a social institution, and the home, as the heart of the nuclear family, became symbols of national recovery, with the domestic sphere in particular emerging as a powerful emblem of safety and stability following the upheavals of wartime. The growing proliferation of housing developments also encouraged a retreat from the streets, which had long served practices of socializing, courtship, and sexual encounters. Yet, these emergent norms were defined as much by exclusion as by conformity. Deviations from the prescribed ideals of home and family were no longer merely shortcomings; they became public indicators of deficient citizenship and weakened national allegiance. Within this context, the homosexual subject became a figure of heightened scrutiny, perceived as incompatible with the dominant vision of domestic life.[27]

It is therefore reasonable to suggest that the history of the twin bed system, while conventionally associated with the pursuit of autonomy within heterosexual marriages, assumes a more nuanced significance when examined through the prism of same-sex relationships. The bed-sitting room shared by Joe Orton and his partner Kenneth Halliwell in 1960s Islington invites a closer examination of the spatial politics embedded in their twin bed arrangement. While twin beds were typically associated with progressive, modern marital ideals, which embraced the idea of each partner having a bed of their own, several twentieth-century accounts suggest that they also served as a discreet setting for non-heterosexual

22 Ibid., 14–16.

23 Opposed to this sleeping arrangement was, for example, the romantic novelist Barbara Catland who believed that twin beds represented the "coldness that exists in […] marriage." Read more in Hilary Hinds, *A Cultural History of Twin Beds*, 19.

24 For a detailed discussion of the history of the twin-bed system, the various theories surrounding it, and its associated controversies, see Hilary Hinds, *A Cultural History of Twin Beds* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

25 Matt Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London* (New York and Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 144.

26 These numbers were published, among other sources, in Katherine Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914–60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 27.

27 Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London*, 144–145.

intimacy.[28] In this light, the twin bed can be seen as an architectural device mediating the duality of being together privately while appearing apart in the public sphere. For same-sex couples like Orton and Halliwell, such an arrangement allowed them to present a socially acceptable form of cohabitation while privately navigating their desires and identities in ways that subverted the heteronormative social order. In other words, the spatial logic of the twin bed enabled them to exist simultaneously within and beyond the boundaries of a society that sought to marginalize their experiences. Within the interior of Orton and Halliwell's bedsit, two single beds—positioned apart and surrounded by dense murals composed of collaged torn book pages—effectively transformed the space between them into a theater stage for their companionship. This stage drew a wide audience in the wake of the devastating conclusion of their lives. The ensuing media scrutiny that followed cast their relationship as one eroded by the claustrophobic pressure of living in such unnaturally confined quarters, implying that its deterioration was, in some sense, inevitable.[29]

Although Orton and Halliwell's lives may at first seem exceptional, their choice to inhabit a bedsit was far from unusual, reflecting a broader trend in mid-twentieth-century Britain. In fact, surveys indicate that during the 1950s and 1960s, while the male population in bedsits increased dramatically, a significant number of women also occupied these accommodations in London. Homosexual men, however, were particularly singled out.[30] The 1957 BBC documentary *Loneliness* noted that the number of single men tenants had doubled over a span of twenty-five years, marking a pivotal moment as it became the first British television program to openly address homosexuality, referring to homosexuals as "disguised, of course, as single men."[31] Media coverage of the period, such as the 1966 *Observer* article "Bedsit World," similarly cast the lives of bedsit residents in bleak terms, depicting their living conditions as "grim" and their existence as mired in "squalor."[32] Within this context, the twin-bed system and the bedsit emerge as more than material necessities; together, they tell a broader story about the tensions between homosexual existence and domestic life.

To fully understand how Orton and Halliwell arrived at their particular sleeping and living arrangements, it is essential to trace the typological rise of the bedsit in major cities like London. These housing units were created through the subdivision of vacant Georgian and Victorian houses, shaped by both local customs and tenancy laws, and came to represent a distinctive form of affordable British accommodation, primarily serving the lower working class. The bedsit occupied a complex position of in-betweenness, reflecting transitional states of living, but for homosexuals like Orton and Halliwell, it often served as their permanent home. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) describes a bedsit as a combination of a bedroom and living room. Other sources locate the origin of this type of dwelling to the *chambre de bonne* of late 19th-century France, a single room where tenants would live, cook, eat, sleep, and study.[33] In a sense, one could argue that, in the bedsit, the bedroom became the home itself—or, perhaps more accurately, the home was contracted into the bedroom—rendering it fully subject to the weight of domestic labor.

28 Such an example is St. Ann's Court, a house designed by Raymond McGrath in the early 1940s for stockbroker Gerland Schlesinger and his partner, landscape architect Christopher Tunnard. The original plans featured a circular master bedroom with two alcoves, intended to accommodate two single beds rather than a single double bed. These beds could be arranged either side by side or separately, allowing them to be moved into the alcoves, effectively transforming the once-circular bedroom into a dressing area. Ultimately, Tunnard became the sole occupant of the house. Read more in Amie Gordon, "House with a secret that even Hercule Poirot couldn't guess," *Mailonline*, September 23, 2016.

29 Armstrong, "The Bedsit," 111.

30 These numbers are published in Mark Armstrong, "The Bedsit" in *Queering the Interior*, ed., Andrew Gorman-Murray and Matt Cook (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 109.

31 Armstrong, "The Bedsit," 109.

32 Ibid., 110.

33 Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, *Living with Strangers: Bedsits and Boarding Houses in Modern English Life, Literature and Film* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2020 [2018]), 2.

Terraced houses in 1960s London. Photographed by John Gay.
From Historic England Archive.

Following the Second World War, London's housing crisis deepened, exacerbated by the slow pace of rebuilding bombed and damaged properties, an already limited housing supply, and the impact of reverse migration from the Indian subcontinent, Africa, and the Caribbean, alongside refugees from war-torn Europe. This strain transformed areas into hubs of neglect and exploitation by profiteers. Britain faced the daunting task of rebuilding cities like London, where 475,000 homes were either destroyed or uninhabitable, with countless others in need of repair. In response to the severe housing shortage, many immigrants often bought dilapidated properties, subdividing them to rent out to other newcomers.[34] Although rent controls and postwar housing legislation aimed to curb exploitation and improve the living conditions in multi-occupied houses, their effects were uneven, leaving many properties overcrowded. Against this backdrop, the growing need for single-person accommodation became increasingly visible, exemplified by the 1946 "Britain Can Make It" exhibition, which showcased bedsit models designed specifically for individual living though, in practice, they frequently housed more than one occupant.[35]

These developments in housing practice and the proliferation of subdivided properties highlighted the need for a clear legal definition of what constituted a self-contained dwelling. In response, the 1965 Report of the Committee on Housing in Greater London, together with data from the 1961 Census, defined a dwelling as "a building or part of a building which provides separate living quarters… with a front door of its own." For a unit to qualify as a dwelling, internal movement between its rooms had to be possible without using any communal form of passage. As a result, bedsits were not considered separate dwellings. Dwellings occupied by more than one household were categorized as "multi-occupied dwellings," with the report indicating that London's 209,000 such units housed 532,900 people. Boarding houses and bedsits, while both forms of shared housing, differed significantly in the populations they often served and the living conditions they offered. In the early twentieth century, boarding hous-

34 Ibid., 11.
35 Ibid.

es typically accommodated retired army officers or single women, many of whom were impacted by the loss of men during the First World War. Boarders enjoyed meals together, had household chores like laundry and cleaning managed for them, and often participated in communal entertainment. They were generally considered in Britain to cater to a more 'privileged' class compared to the modest and solitary bedsit.[36] Consequently, working-class men and women faced limited housing options. In response, they gravitated toward more economically viable alternatives. Bedsits, typically consisting of a single room with limited cooking facilities and, most often, a collective bathroom, offered more independence than boarding houses. This arrangement appealed to those seeking greater autonomy, even within humbler living conditions.[37] Over time, London neighborhoods such as Notting Hill, Islington, Pimlico, Bayswater, and St. Pancras came to be colloquially referred to as "bedsitter land."[38] In these areas, a discernible pattern developed among homosexuals congregating, seen as a typical reaction of marginalized groups to social exclusion. Their organization was not solely based on personal preferences; it was closely linked to the housing market, shaped by available housing options and varying purchasing power, thereby exacerbating the social class divide along geographic lines. Nevertheless, this dynamic also facilitated the cultivation of a sense of community.[39]

The postwar era, particularly during the late 1950s and 1960s, witnessed notable demographic changes, highlighted by a twenty percent increase in the teenage population as the cohort born after the Second World War came of age. This demographic shift heralded a vibrant youth culture that not only disrupted the existing social order but also deepened the generational divide. Although groups like single mothers, homosexuals, and sex workers continued to face harsh judgment, a sense of progress began to take shape. Efforts to reform laws surrounding homosexuality gained momentum, bolstered by contributions from film, literature, sociology, and advocacy organizations like the Homosexual Law Reform Society. London, during this time, was re-envisioned as a cosmopolitan and progressive city. Major legislative changes followed, including the partial legalization of abortion (1967), no-fault divorce (1969), and the decriminalization of private homosexual acts between men over age 21 (1967). These changes marked a turning point for many, as testified by several homosexual couples, who felt free to buy a double bed after the law changed.[40] It is important to note that the case of Orton and Halliwell preceded these advancements toward equal rights. Nevertheless, during their time, social interactions evolved as arts, fashion, music, and nightlife became central to London life, particularly in Soho and Chelsea. Bars like the Candy Lounge and Le Duce flourished as vibrant, inclusive spaces for dancing and expression, representing a democratization of leisure. These venues, among others, fostered the emergence of what we now term queer counterculture, influenced by significant political movements and international protests, such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War demonstrations in the United States. Yet, the increasing prevalence of recreational drug use by the 1960s generated social anxieties, prompting stricter legal regulation as London navigated the complexities of its changing social landscape.[41]

36 Ibid., 2–3.
37 Briganti and Mezei, *Living with Strangers: Bedsits and Boarding Houses in Modern English Life, Literature and Film*, 3.
38 Matt Cook is quoted in Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezel, *Living with Strangers: Bedsits and Boarding Houses in Modern English Life, Literature and Film*, 5.
39 Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918–1957* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 113.
40 Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London*, 174–175.
41 Ibid., 175.

ORTON AND HALLIWELL'S BEDSIT

Amidst these societal shifts, the relationship between Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell found fertile ground to flourish—one that might have been unimaginable in previous decades. Born into a working-class family in Leicester as the third of four children, Orton grew up in an atmosphere of financial hardship and familial tension that left a lasting imprint on his outlook.[42] The eldest sibling, John Kingsley Orton, spent much of the 1930s living in lodgings, grappling with the weight of his mother Elsie's expectations. She regarded him as 'gifted' and refused to accept the limitations imposed by his recurrent asthma attacks, which contributed to his failure in the eleven-plus exam. Determined that her children deserved better, Elsie enrolled him in Clark's College, prioritizing its prestige over its appropriateness for John's needs. The curriculum, however, proved ill-suited for him; his teacher noted his difficulties with basic literacy and stressed that he would have thrived in a different environment. Undeterred, Elsie pawned her wedding ring to cover tuition fees, claiming to friends that she lost it during household chores.[43] This demanding upbringing eventually led Orton to amateur dramatics, which offered a means of escape from his immediate circumstances and a channel for creative self-expression.

Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell sitting at Duncan Terrace, London, ca.1967.

His move to London in 1951, after earning a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), marked a decisive turning point—a trajectory shared by other working-class artists of the period, such as Carl Marshall and Alan Louis, who likewise sought to transcend their social origins.[44] It was in London that Orton met Kenneth Halliwell, who would become his lifelong partner. As John Lahr noted, Orton discovered the only family he would ever truly acknowledge in Halliwell. The latter had moved to the city after losing his parents, and Orton often seemed estranged from his own, frequently leaving family holidays early to be with

42 Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton*, 47.
43 Ibid., 57.
44 Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London*, 177.

Halliwell.[45] Halliwell's background, however, stood in stark contrast to Orton's. Although materially secure, his childhood was characterised by emotional neglect. His mother indulged his every whim, but his father remained a cold and distant presence. When his father took his own life, Halliwell displayed a troubling detachment—reportedly choosing to brew tea before notifying the neighbors upon discovering the body. With an inheritance of £4,321 after his father's death in 1949, he briefly enjoyed financial independence, embracing a life of extravagance. He hired a housekeeper—though he often struggled to retain staff—and adorned himself in fine clothing. Some accounts suggest that he carried himself as someone who felt little obligation to work.[46]

'The Hermit' turns librarian to solve the case of . .

THE GORILLA IN THE ROSES

By HUGH SAKER

STRANGE things began to happen to books borrowed from a public library. Old ladies found pictures of gorillas in books about roses. Mythology readers found passages from Edgar Wallace in the middle of chapters about Greek gods.

DAILY MIRROR

Art-lovers found that faces in reproductions of great paintings had been replaced by the faces of cats, birds and frogs.

Typewritten on the fly-leaves of other books were suggestions that the authors should be burnt at the stake.

All these strange happenings worried the readers, the librarians, and the library committee at Islington, London.

But stranger things were happening at a flat in Noel-road, Islington.

An unusual wallpaper was going up in the bedroom and the bathroom.

It was made up of more than 1,000 beautiful prints taken from library books.

The prints were missed by librarians. And Det-Sgt Harry ("The Hermit") Hermitage was called in to work on his strangest case

Flat

His inquiries led him to the flat—the home of Kenneth Halliwell, 35, an invoice clerk, and John Orton, 29, a bus cleaner.

And there he seized nearly 100 stolen library books, 1,350 stolen plates from library books, and saw the 1,000 pictures on the walls.

It had taken him months to track them down.

He started his search by serving as a librarian every Saturday. He narrowed his suspects down to eight, then to ten.

It was the typewriter which the two men used for the comments on the fly-leaves that brought them to Old-street magistrates' court yesterday.

Letter

A letter was sent to them, asking about a car parked outside their house. They typed out a reply.

Experts identified the type.

The men were jailed for a total of six months on five charges, and fined £2 or a further month on two other charges.

APPINESS

ervous, like every bride low the wedding service gone.

her great happiness.

And pretty Jacqueline Cable-Alexander, 26, leaves St. Michael's Church, Chester-square, London, yesterday.

Daughter of Sir Desmond Cable-Alexander, of Pulborough, Sussex, she married Mr. Dillon Welchman, of Manaton, Devon.

Royal tripe puts Bob in a stew

THE Duke of Edinburgh's use of the word "tripe" has upset Lancashire tripe-dresser Bob Hulme.

Said 55-year-old Mr. Hulme, of Denton, last night: "I shall register a protest at a conference

Article published in the *Daily Mirror*, 16 May 1962.
Courtesy of Islington Archives and the *Daily Mirror*.

The early years of both Halliwell and Orton, particularly in how they engaged with their homes, hinted at lives that would eventually resist—and perhaps even resent—the suffocating confines of conventional homemaking practices. This engagement can be seen as a *proto-queer* gesture,[47] an early act of territorializing their personal spaces, even while still living in their parent's homes. After his father's death and a period spent with neighbors, Halliwell returned home alone and set about reclaiming the family house, imposing his vision through a series of deliberate changes. He repainted large sections of the interior, including the furniture, and adorned the dining room walls with carefully curated images cut from art books, establishing a setting governed by his artistic sensibilities. Or-

45 Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton*, 89.
46 Ibid., 107, 110.
47 The term *proto-queer* was used by Michael Moon to describe his younger years and the ways in which he claimed his personal space as his own. Read more in Michael Moon, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Benjamin Gianni, and Scott Weir, "Queers in (Single-Family) Space," *Assemblage*, no. 24 (1994): 30–37.

ton, too, demonstrated an early impulse to reimagine and reconfigure his surroundings. His youthful diaries reveal a mind captivated by the theatre—not simply as a stage for performance, but as a world to inhabit. In the bedroom he shared with his brother Douglas, Orton subtly asserted his own presence, stripping away the linoleum flooring and painting doors and closets in a soft, creamy shade, a choice that brought an intentional austerity to the room. Onto this blank, self-made, canvas, he inscribed coded shorthand learned in college and pinned theater programs from his early roles in amateur productions, embedding the walls with markers of his emerging personal and creative life.[48]

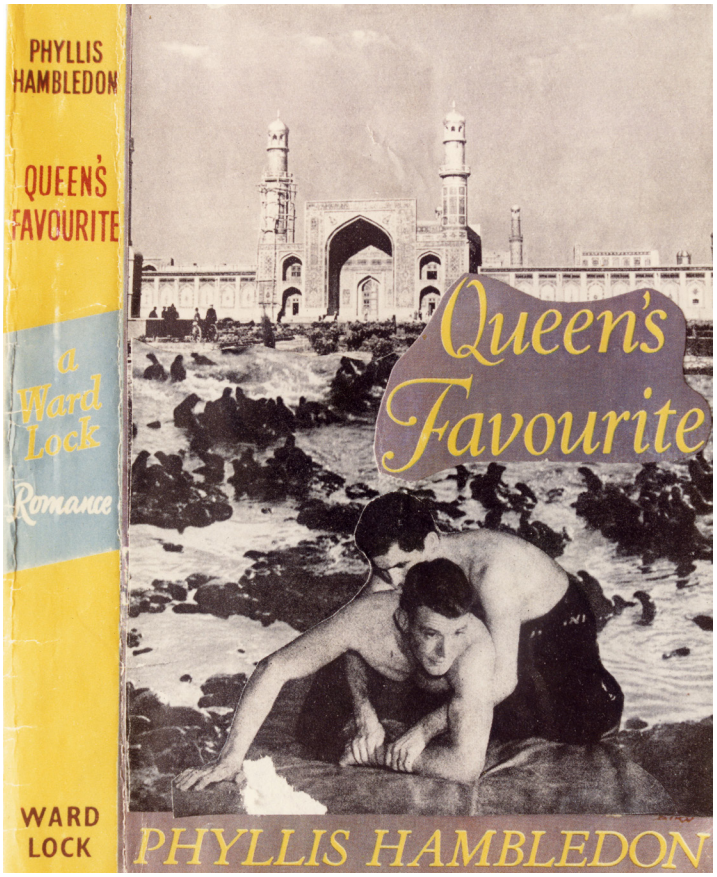
The English public first learned of Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell in 1962, in the most peculiar manner. On May 15, the *Daily Mirror* ran a headline exposing a vicious act of literary vandalism. Books from the Islington and Hampstead libraries were mysteriously reappearing with altered covers and images, while some pages disappeared completely, as they had been used to wallpaper the walls of the couple's bed-sitting room. The article, provocatively titled "Gorillas in the Roses," took its name from one of their creations: an edition of *The Collins Guide to Roses* whose cover now featured the head of a monkey pasted amid the petals of a bloom.[49] At the time of their arrest, twenty-nine-year-old Orton—described in court as a "lens cleaner"—and thirty-five-year-old Halliwell, listed as a "cleaner," were charged at Old Street Magistrates' Court with stealing seventy-two library books and defacing many others by removing 1,653 plates from art volumes. The total damage was estimated at £450, and both men were sentenced to six months' imprisonment. The case quickly captured public imagination, reappearing in *Reader's Digest* and numerous national newspapers, though the full extent of their artistic interventions remained largely obscured. In fact, the notorious 'gorilla' of the *Mirror* headline was a gibbon, its pear-shaped head eerily framed by rose petals—a composition that revealed a darkly comic sensibility beneath the surface scandal. [50] In an interview with Eamonn Andrews in April 1967, just five months before his death, Joe Orton reflected humorously on his time in jail, particularly his library pranks. Recounting the incidents with characteristic irony, he said:

> I used to do very strange things on library books. It was really a joke. I used to take lots of books out of the library and I used to smuggle them out in a satchel and then I used to sort of paste a picture over the picture of the author […] I remember one was about, I think, a book on etiquette actually and it showed a picture of Lady Lewisham or something in her garden and I painted a picture or pasted a picture of a great nude woman kept from a nude book so it said Lady Lewisham and people must have been very surprised.

When Andrews asked why he committed these acts and whether he regretted them, Orton's answer was as irreverent as ever:

> It was just a joke. I mean well also I didn't like libraries anyway and I thought they spend far too much public money on rubbish. I didn't like the books […] I don't think people need books in etiquette anyway […] No regrets at all, no. I had a marvelous time in prison.[51]

48 Ilsa Colsell, *Malicious Damage: The Defaced Library Books of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton* (London: Donlon Books, 2013), 30–31.
49 Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton*, 93.
50 Ibid., 94.
51 These fragments from the interview were transcribed by the author. See the full interview in Joe Orton, Interview by Eamonn Andrews, *The Eamonn Andrews Show*, ABC, April, 23, 1967.



One of the collaged library books, *The Queen's Favorite*, ca. 1962. Courtesy of Islington Archives.

While neither Orton nor Halliwell ever openly admitted how profoundly jail time had impacted their lives, the effects were undeniable. For Orton, prison ignited his passion for writing, sharpening his rebellious, satirical voice. Halliwell, in contrast, experienced a much darker outcome. He spiraled into despair, ultimately leading him to attempt suicide as the weight of ridicule and defeat became unbearable.[52]

The couple shared a flat in West Hampstead before moving into their bedsit in Islington, with Halliwell's inheritance providing their early support. They initially embarked on various collaborative projects, ranging from novels to poems, yet none were accepted for publication. Their days were rhythmically structured: mornings devoted to writing, afternoons to reading, and, when weather permitted, long hours spent sunbathing. To economize on electricity, they aligned their lives with the rhythm of the day—rising at dawn, sleeping at sunset. When Halliwell's small inheritance ran out, they worked for six months, saving just enough to secure another half-year of uninterrupted writing.[53] At first, Orton served primarily as a typist, but gradually his contributions became more significant, leading him to do all the writing while Halliwell's role diminished to that of a critic. Orton's diaries depict Halliwell withdrawing into their cramped bedsit as Orton began to ascend socially and professionally. Jealousy replaced their once passionate relationship, and bitter exchanges became commonplace. Although Orton professed loyalty to Halliwell, he pursued sexual relationships with others, seeing such encounters as inseparable from his creative impulses. This accumulation of tension between the two men, who had spent so long together and shared so much, paints a picture of a relationship and domestic environment that had become a suffocating

52 Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton*, 105.
53 John Lahr, "Introduction" in *Joe Orton: The Complete Plays*, ed., John Lahr (New York: Grove Press, 1990 [1977]), 13–14.

trap.[54] However, Orton's open and oversexualized nature, "was a badge of pride for him, for he refused to be guilt-ridden about his homosexuality."[55] For Orton, sex represented a form of resistance to the hypocrisy of the middle-class, embodying the purest form of satisfaction unbound by societal restrictions. He frequently advised his friends to "reject all the values of society."[56] This philosophy led him to cruise London's public toilets and engage in passionate encounters with young men during his travels —an outlook on life he vividly expressed in his diaries:

> Kenneth… tells me of the latest way-out group in America — complete sexual license. "It's the only way to smash the wretched civilization," I said, making a mental note to hot-up *What the Butler Saw* when I came to rewrite... Sex is the only way to infuriate them.[57]

Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell shared an inseparable bond that endured for fifteen years. They lived together, frequently swapping clothes and even designating each other as the sole beneficiaries of their wills. Their lives intertwined in nearly every aspect, with the notable exception of their professional achievements.[58] While Halliwell was the one who had purchased their second-floor bedsit at 25 Noel Road in Islington, Orton was the one who ultimately thrived, emerging as a playwright of considerable international acclaim.[59] In the film *Prick Up Your Ears*, a scene unfolds in which Halliwell and Orton consider their move to Islington. The landlady led them through what they perceived to be a cramped and claustrophobic bedsit on the second floor of a building, the atmosphere weighed down by nondescript wallpaper and the lingering staleness of candlewick. Detecting their hesitation, the landlady attempted to sell them on the so-called emerging charms of the neighborhood: "The greengrocer is now an antiques shop," she proclaimed. "And the pub does salad."[60] Though the evolving landscape of Islington contrasted with Orton's working-class roots, which the area had initially reflected, he and Halliwell unwittingly became part of a broader phenomenon within the middle-class artistic community. Before gentrification took hold, neglected central properties were reclaimed and repurposed. Their early acquisition in Islington placed figures like Orton and Halliwell among the first homeowners to influence the neighborhood's demographic shift in the 1960s and reshape the territory in the decades that followed.[61]

Developed around 1841, Noel Road had originally been two separate streets—Noel Street and Hanover Street—until their consolidation in 1938. Overlooking the Regent's Canal, the building where the couple resided exemplified nineteenth-century terraced housing. Its exterior was unassuming and largely standardized, reflecting the consistent rhythm of the street, yet it concealed an interior world of its own. The yellow brick façade, laid in Flemish bond, continued the pattern of the neighboring houses, while the stuccoed basement and ground floor, distinguished by banded rustication, added subtle texture to an otherwise flat surface. The entrance, a round-arched opening flanked by pilaster jambs and topped by a blank fanlight, was echoed by the ground-floor windows, while the flat-arched upper windows emphasized the building's verticality. A first-floor iron balcony, sliding sash windows, cast-iron railings, and a plain parapet completed the façade.[62] It was perhaps expected that the rather austere character, typical of such terraced

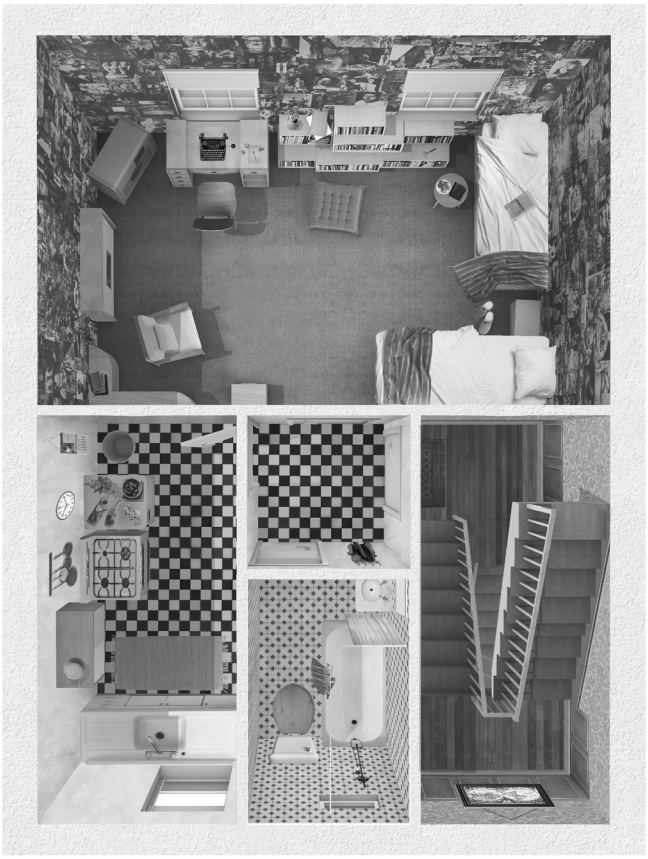
54 David F. Curtis, "Those Awful Orton Diaries," *Sacred Heart University Review*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1987): 41–43.
55 Ibid., 49.
56 Joe Orton quoted in David F. Curtis, "Those Awful Orton Diaries," *Sacred Heart University Review*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1987): 49.
57 Ibid.
58 Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton*, 1.
59 Ibid., 5.
60 The scene is transcribed in Catherine Slessor, "The Battle for the Soul of Outer London," *Architecture Foundation*, September, 1, 2015.
61 Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London*, 180–181.
62 *Islington Noel Road (North Side) Nos. 7–9, 13–53 (Odd) and Attached Railings* (TQ3183SE 635-1/65/652 Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas Report, Islington: National Heritage List for England, 1994 [1972])

houses, combined with their uncomplicated interior divisions, would eventually be taken advantage of by speculators, accommodating multiple domestic arrangements within a single structure. By the 1960s, this process had transformed Noel Road into a densely inhabited and socially heterogeneous street, whose residents were not only unbothered by Orton and Halliwell's relationship but also displayed a degree of friendliness toward the couple.[63]

Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell's bedsit, Noel Road, 1967.
Courtesy of Mirrorpix.

Orton and Halliwell's bedsitting-room as described by others, resembled "some extraordinary tomb," devoid of comfort and marked by austerity.[64] In the final months of their lives, Orton had a discussion with Halliwell about their relationship, expressing his concern about their unsustainable living conditions: "I think it's bad that we live in each other's pockets twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year."[65] The layout of their home consisted of a small, separate kitchenette and bathroom, connected by a narrow corridor to a room that combined various functions—sleeping, living, and working—in line with the typical constraints of a bedsit. Notwithstanding its modest nature, this specific room has since become one of the most photographed domestic interiors of its kind, often capturing Orton reclining on one of two single beds or seated on a chair, with the beds frequently serving as the primary visual backdrop. The beds, positioned against intersecting walls, lacked bedsteads and more closely resembled platforms with drawers integrated into the lower structure. Above all, the room was meticulously organized, with minimal furniture positioned around the periphery, including low bookshelves, a small freestanding wardrobe, a television set, chairs, and side tables. The windows were fitted with Venetian blinds, and an electric heater occupied one corner of the space. The flooring was covered in linoleum, while the walls were painted yellow, and the ceiling featured a stark checkerboard pattern of red and grey, offering a jarring contrast to the otherwise muted palette.[66]

63 Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London*, 181.
64 John Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton*, 16.
65 Ibid., 3.
66 Much of this description derives, among other sources, from Joe Orton's 1967 interview with Giles Gordon. Read more in Christopher Silvester, *The Penguin Book of Interviews: An Anthology from 1859 to the Present Day* (London: Viking, 1993), 512–519.



Photographic plan view based on Islington Archives materials
and council-published renovation schemes.
Drawn by the author.

Perhaps the room's most striking feature was the expansive collage artwork that covered the walls, extending seamlessly up to the ceiling. Each clipped reproduction was carefully placed, edges aligned precisely at right angles, whereas empty spaces were filled with smaller cutouts and floral elements. Within this ordered arrangement, certain images overlapped, their raised edges subtly catching the light and revealing the layered depth of the composition. Color and monochrome plates mingled freely, creating a textured surface where deep, shadowy tones contrasted sharply with bright, vivid colors. The selected artworks primarily drew from Renaissance, Hellenistic, and medieval sources, with modern pieces rarely present. The compositions were mainly figurative, punctuated by still lifes and occasional empty landscapes that served as visual pauses. The walls were populated with hundreds of gazing faces, each directed outward or off into the distance, forming a silent assembly of watchers. Amidst this apparent randomness, subtle patterns took form: a line of pietas guarding a window ledge, clusters of Byzantine crucifixes, and repeated depictions of Michelangelo's *David*, all contributing to the rhythm and flow of the room's visual field. Above the fireplace, an especially dense collage section rose toward the ceiling, anchored by Holbein's *Sir Thomas More*, encircled by philosophers' faces interwoven with floral motifs. A single bloom drooped downward toward Manet's *Olympia* reclining below, adding a layered intensity to this focal point. Around the mantel, the arrangement grew more defined, with nudes—posed and contorted, male and female—creating a symbolic frame around the hearth, the room's center. Figures of Greek kouroi and korai introduced an innocence, while select pieces retained their original backgrounds, establishing a darker presence within the assemblage's mythic and symbolic framework.[67] In certain places, the display

67 Colsell, *Malicious Damage: The Defaced Library Books of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton*, 25–26.

took on a playful tone, as in a map of Australia transformed into a skirt for a hybrid creature with the body of an ape and the legs of a horse.

Photographic plan view based on Islington Archives materials
and council-published renovation schemes.
Drawn by the author.

The mural technique employed in Orton and Halliwell's bedsit, with its use of 'found' material, aligns with the ethos of London's Independent Group of artists, who convened at the Institute of Contemporary Art between 1952 and 1955. This avant-garde collective, preoccupied with mass culture and everyday objects, aimed to challenge the rigid hierarchies that traditionally separated fine art from popular culture. By dismantling such distinctions, they laid the conceptual groundwork for the emergence of pop art in the late 1950s. George Melly, the flamboyantly bisexual jazz musician, described these experiments as a "revolt into style," noting its embrace of kitsch and camp aesthetics. The murals in Orton and Halliwell's bedsit reflected this subversive energy, recalling, as Cook had observed, the "amusing" stylistic experiments of the Bloomsbury Group, as well as the works of Charles Shannon and Charles Ricketts on Kensington Park Road. In Orton and Halliwell's bedsit, the murals offered a bold defiance of conventional home-making practices. The chaotic yet meticulously structured array of figures—often featuring a mingling of faces and naked torsos—turned the walls of their home into a site of artistic expression. Over time, however, the mural diminished as sections were removed or painted over. By the summer of 1967, art historian Ilsa Colsell noted that "there would be no collages pasted directly onto the walls of Noel Road," leaving only Halliwell's framed works and Orton's play posters as the sole elements installed on the walls. If we accept Colsell's claim that the murals were primarily the work of Halliwell, it would indicate the couple's deep immersion in his artistic vision for a significant portion of their lives together. But as Orton's fame escalated, the fading presence of the murals may suggest a shift within the household—a move, whether conscious or not, toward foregrounding Orton's rising public success.[68]

68 Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London*, 186.

View of the couple's bedsit showing the bookcase and records, 1962.
Courtesy of the Islington Archives.

Despite the presence of these murals, their bedsit was stripped of the consumerist impulses that typically influenced other couples' domestic interiors, especially those with similar financial means. Following their death, a letter from a lawyer was delivered to Orton's brother cataloguing the few valuable items in the flat, which stood out amidst the otherwise sparse furnishings:

> Of the articles remaining in the flat it would appear that the most valuable are your brother's typewriter, two student-type table lamps which appear to be new, and a considerable number of gramophone records and books. There is also what appears to be a valuable hi-fi set. Copies of your brother's plays of course will eventually form part of his Estate, and all the paintings in the flat appear to have been collages done by Halliwell. There is a quantity of clothing in the flat including a great coat which Miss Ramsay has suggested you may care to keep. Apparently it was one which she gave to your brother.[69]

For Halliwell, the bed-sitting room was his haven, much like it might have been for many other homosexuals of the time, with every wall bearing the mark of his presence. As the primary caretaker of its cleanliness and interior arrangement, he took great pride in their home. Orton, on the other hand, had begun to loathe it. "I really do think I'll need to get something larger soon," he remarked publicly to the *Evening News* in June 1967. He elaborated, saying, "Just to have a room to work in. I work better when

69 The letter is quoted in Matt Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London* (New York and Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 182.

there's someone else wandering around but it's not fair to the other person. They can't read and if they want to type anything the place sounds like a typing pool." In private, Orton was more cutting. The room magnified his fear of reaching an emotional and creative impasse. He frequently stayed away, perpetually finding distractions, and Halliwell was acutely aware of the significance of these absences. At some point, Halliwell suggested relocating to Brighton but keeping the London flat as a pied-à-terre. Orton mentioned he could "pop down on weekends," a suggestion that did not sit well with Halliwell.[70] Orton is recurrently described as vain and smug, applying baby oil to his skin, exercising, and grooming, whereas Halliwell, occasionally wearing an ill-fitting wig, was out of shape and disheartened, feeling insecure as his younger partner reveled in sexual indulgence.[71] Undoubtedly, their coexistence was severely strained for a variety of reasons, largely stemming from Halliwell's mental health struggles. Fuelled by possessiveness and jealousy, these strains frequently escalated into episodes of both physical and emotional abuse directed at Orton.[72]

Building on the insights presented by John Lahr in Orton's biography,[73] Matt Cook further explored the enduring mysteries surrounding the life of the notorious playwright in his 2008 article "Orton in the Archives." While John Lahr was responsible for assembling the available sources, including Orton's diaries and letters, Cook highlights a sense of protectiveness and notable gaps in the material to which Lahr had access. This protectiveness is particularly evident in the note Cook recalls, left by Halliwell on top of Orton's diary before their deaths, claiming that all is explained within. Yet the diary ends abruptly mid-sentence on August 1, 1967, just 11 days before Orton's murder and Halliwell's subsequent suicide, with several pages appearing to be missing. For Cook, this fractured narrative is emblematic of what he sees as Orton's "distinctively queer" nature—an unwillingness to allow others to define him by a crystalized identity, one which could potentially be used against him.[74] The gaps in Orton's story thus invite "posthumous reinventions," compounded by the protectiveness of his 'guardians' over how his life and personality are interpreted and presented.[75] Among these guardians, Peggy Ramsay, Orton's agent and literary executor, played a particularly influential role. She is depicted in the film *Prick Up Your Ears*—based on Lahr's biography—as retrieving the diaries from Orton's bedsit on Noel Road, a portrayal that Lahr himself contested. Restricted to the materials Ramsay had provided, Lahr was compelled to navigate a narrative that was already carefully curated. Furthermore, Ramsay also implored the Orton family to withhold substantial portions of Orton's work from Boston University, which now houses various copies of the diaries and transcripts. This resistance to closure, combined with the protectiveness surrounding Orton's legacy, ensured that Orton remained a figure whose identity could not be rigidly defined or crystallized.[76] Ramsay's concern over Orton's image was palpable; she believed the diaries misrepresented him, asserting in a letter to Douglas that "he was better as a person than this."[77] According to Cook her sentiments revealed a "class-based paternalism,"—or, as Leonie Orton observed, a concern for "the poor dead boy"—which she extended to the Orton family in the wake of Joe's death.[78] Perhaps this ambiguity is what led Matt Houlbrook to assert that Joe Orton was "neither a quean[sic] nor 'normal,' unequivocally masculine yet exclusively queer, …

70 Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton*, 12; 38.
71 Kate Dorney, "Through the Closet with Ken and Joe: A Close Look at Clothes, Poses and Exposure," *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, vol. 37, no. 2 (2017): 272.
72 Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton*, 12.
73 See John Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton* (Middlesex: Penguin Books: 1980 [1978]).
74 Matt Cook, "Orton in the Archives," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 66 (2008): 166.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., 165–172.
77 Peggy Ramsay is quoted in Matt Cook, "Orton in the Archives," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 66 (2008): 172.
78 Leonie Orton is quoted in Matt Cook, "Orton in the Archives," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 66 (2008): 172.

a novel figure within working class culture."[79] These contradictions concerning Orton's personality are also evident in Leonie Orton's interviews and public statements. For example, she once mentioned that Joe "liked the mystique about homosexuality," even appreciating its "closeted aspect […] He wouldn't have gone for the modern gay marriage."[80]

THE MARRIAGE OF SINGLE BEDS

The separation of the couple's beds seemed inadequate to support their long-term relationship, with Orton, in particular, seeking greater independence. While twin beds were a common choice for heterosexual couples of the time, the reasoning behind Orton and Halliwell's arrangement remains ambiguous. In an interview for this research, Leonie Orton suggested that "I can only assume it was for discretion as homosexuality was still illegal when they moved in."[81] For many homosexual couples, twin beds often served as a means of discretion. They could also be a practical choice to economize space in a small bed-sitting room or simply adhere to prevailing fashion. It's likely that all these factors contributed to the configuration of their room. Still, the illegality of homosexuality most probably played a decisive role in the couple's sleeping arrangements, reflecting the pervasive climate of repression and persecution that persisted even after their deaths, with the passing of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act. Although this legislation decriminalized certain homosexual acts, it imposed strict conditions: only consensual relationships conducted in private between men over the age of 21 were legally permissible. Notably, when the couple was arrested for malicious damage, they concealed their romantic relationship from the police. It wasn't until their psychological evaluations at Wormwood Scrubs that the psychiatrist brought up the subject of homosexuality, remarking to Orton, "I think your friend is homosexual," to which Orton replied, "You don't say." The two single beds at Noel Road served as a convenient safeguard during their arrest—a deliberate measure to mitigate the risk of prosecution under Section 11 of the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, which criminalized all sexual relations between men, carrying a penalty of up to two years' imprisonment, potentially with hard labor.[82]

Philip Hoare observed an intriguing combination of unsettling and captivating qualities in the austere, almost monastic, nature of their bed-sitting room and its interior arrangement. He described how:

> The narrow single beds were set at right-angles to one another, to prove to any visitor—which could and indeed did include officers of the law—that this space was shared by men, but not these sheets. Such asceticism militates against what we know of Orton's appetite, yet also represents the compromise with the more reticent Halliwell—the mediation of their mutually agreed *modus operandi*.
> That Spartan Imposition also spoke of another age, and its paradoxes. The hangover of the Second World War and the implementation of National Service meant that men were institutionally used to sleeping together; those Islington bunks might have been in a barrack or the fo'c's'le of a ship.[83]

79 Matt Houlbrok is quoted in Matt Cook, "Orton in the Archives," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 66 (2008): 165.
80 Leonie Orton is quoted in Liam Barnes, "The Subversive Genius of Joe Orton," *BBC News*, August, 9, 2017.
81 The interview was conducted in writing through Joe Orton Estate's agency, Casarotto and Ramsay Associates, in October 2024.
82 Colsell, *Malicious Damage: The Defaced Library Books of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton*, 38.
83 Philip Hoare, "A Genius Like Us," in Ilsa Colsell, *Malicious Damage: The Defaced Library Books of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton* (London: Donlon Books, 2013), 13.

However, it must be noted that the question of discretion remains complex and subjective, leaving the true nature of their private lives open to interpretation and uncertainty. Over time, the couple demonstrated that they were not inclined to shy away from exposing themselves in their social and professional lives. Although Halliwell is imagined as extremely private, Orton frequently contradicted this image, showing on several occasions that he did not seek to live in secrecy—a choice less common among many of his contemporaries. He openly expressed his sexuality in daily life, often visiting his agent's office with his partner, an act that risked 'outing' him. Unapologetically, he also refused to lower his voice when discussing gay sex in public, which led Halliwell to accuse him of engaging in "verbal exhibitionism."[84]

Reconstruction of the bedsitting-room interior, showing the couple's sleeping arrangement. Drawn by the author.

The arrangement of their beds diverged significantly from the prevailing twin-bed configurations of the period, which typically featured single beds placed side by side, often joined together in parallel. This standard setup, though ostensibly designed to foster an emotional connection between partners, also maintained a deliberate yet subtle physical separation. In contrast, the beds in Orton and Halliwell's bed-sitting room were positioned perpendicularly to one another, creating a spatial arrangement in which the individuals lying in bed could not naturally see one another. For visual contact to occur, they would have to assume a non-reclining position, one that disrupted the natural rhythm of rest. This unusual positioning suggests an intentional interior arrangement, designed to prioritize other functions over the usual act between partners of sleeping

84 Kenneth Halliwell is quoted in Stephen Farrier, "Sticky Stories: Joe Orton, Queer History, Queer Dramaturgy," *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, vol. 37, no. 2 (2017): 189.

side-by-side. Photographs of Orton captured inside the room often depict him in a semi-reclining position, absorbed in reading, hinting that these beds served purposes beyond merely providing rest. They may have also been used as couches. While it may be excessive to directly compare Orton and Halliwell's arrangement to the Greek *andron*, there are notable parallels in the positioning of the beds and the adaptable character of the space. The andron was a room in privileged ancient Greek households, primarily dedicated to the *symposium*, a cultural practice exercised by men. The word itself means "drinking together," but it refers to a particular form of communal drinking. In most cases, the andron had colorful walls and a mosaic floor; its interior was created by perpendicularly organized platforms, either made by the room's raised sides or strategically placed furniture around its perimeter.[85] While much has been written about the andron—its multifunctional role and its use by all members of the household—the room, on certain occasions, likely during the night, took on a more liberated, ritualistic character. It became a space for music, wine, debates, poetry, and sexual play. As some scholars have argued, the andron represented "the truest, if not the only, experience of leisure" for men in ancient Greek society.[86]

On the other hand, for Orton and Halliwell there was no luxury of separation between rest, work, and leisure. They had little choice but to embrace collective practices, folding them into the very fabric of their most intimate—and, indeed, their only—room. Defying the typical expectations of a bedroom, their bed-sitting room served as a space for hosting guests, with their two single beds inevitably fulfilling a range of roles—accommodating both the private and public functions of the household. This is corroborated in the recollections of Kenneth Cranham, who worked with Orton on *The Ruffian on the Stair*, and later in *Loot*. In an interview for *The Guardian*, Cranham described his experiences visiting the couple's bedsit. Reflecting on one such visit, he recalled,

> We would meet up at Simon Ward's house, or at Joe and Kenneth's bedsit in Islington. I remember going there one day and listening to the soundtrack of the musical Pal Joey. They'd bought tons of old-fashioned cream cakes. The walls were covered in collage images—there were renaissance pictures, and one image of a baby being born out of the heart of Africa. The montages look striking of Joe at home, but when you were actually there, they were very vivid and you felt a bit attacked by it.[87]

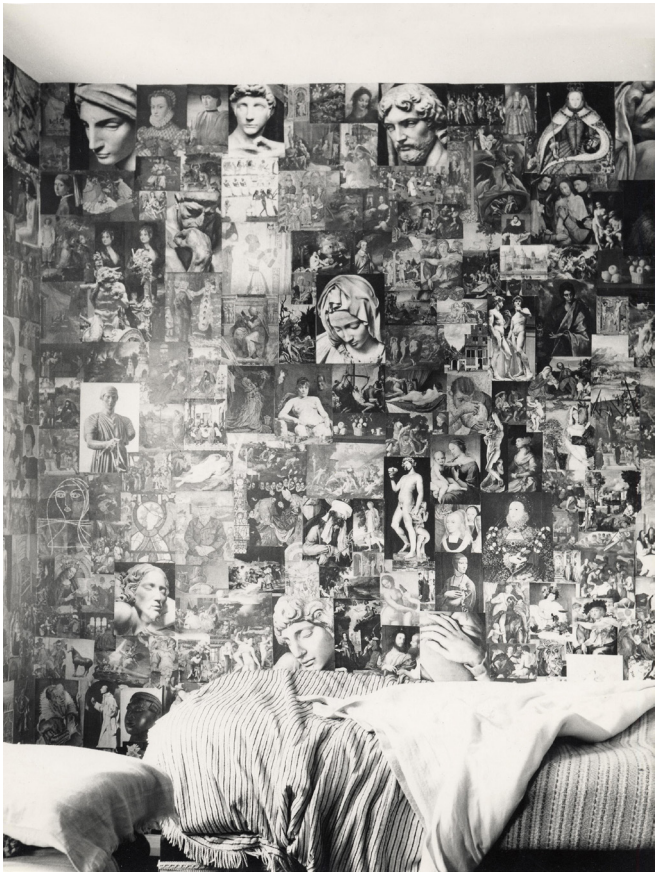
When Leonie described her visits to her brother's bedsit, which she made on several occasions, she recalled the space as both peculiar and fascinating to her as a young woman. She vividly remembered being offered tea, though the absence of a table led her to speculate that meals were likely eaten informally, perhaps on their laps.[88] These personal accounts not only capture the overwhelming nature of their bed-sitting room but also reinforce the idea that, within this confined, multifunctional space, social interaction, and exchange took place—it was a place where friends and collaborators could gather and engage.

85 Kathleen M. Lynch, "More Thoughts on the Space of the Symposium," *British School at Athens Studies* 15 (2007): 243.

86 Pier Vittorio Aureli and Maria Shéhérazade Giudici, "The Form of the Otium: Labor and Leisure in Greek and Roman Domestic Space," *Burning Farm* (October 10, 2023 [2018]).

87 Emine Saner, "Kenneth Cranham on Joe Orton: The Charming Mischief-Maker," *The Guardian*, August, 9, 2017.

88 The interview was conducted in writing through Joe Orton Estate's agency, Casarotto and Ramsay Associates, in October 2024.



View of one of the couple's beds, 1962.
Courtesy of Islington Archives.

The domestic interiors of the twentieth century, most notably the bedroom, represented a significant shift from the Victorian values that had previously dominated the period. These values, at least in relation to heterosexual relationships, had traditionally placed a greater emphasis on procreation over emotional intimacy within romantic partnerships. Historian Esme Wingfield-Stratford noted that the marital bedroom has been, from its inception, the "Holy of Holies in the vast temple of middle-class domesticity,"[89] with the double bed serving as the material engine for perpetuating the nuclear family. Yet, by the early 1900s, a growing consensus began to advocate for marital mutualism—a relationship grounded on equality and companionship. Within this discourse, the adoption of twin beds became emblematic of these shifting social dynamics, particularly as it challenged traditional gender roles and redefined the contours of intimate partnerships.[90] These ideas seem to be aligned with Cook's theory on Orton and Halliwell's sleeping arrangement. Orton and Halliwell's 'marriage' may perhaps have been one of equal symbiosis, expressed in all of its forms. Cook argues that the adoption of single beds provided a level of privacy while simultaneously fostering a sense of equal and parallel masculinity among the men involved. Orton expressed this idea in a production note for *Loot*, asserting, "Americans see homosexuality in terms of fag and drag. This isn't my vision of the universal brotherhood. They must be perfectly ordinary boys who happen to be fucking each other. Nothing could be more natural. I won't have the Great American Queen brought into it." For Orton, the ideas of brotherhood and sexual fluidity held greater appeal than the prevailing portrayals of homosexuality, often

89 Esme Wingfield-Stratford is quoted in Hilary Hinds, *A Cultural History of Twin Beds* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 85.
90 For a deeper exploration of theories surrounding marital mutualism, see Hilary Hinds, *A Cultural History of Twin Beds* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 142.

depicted as effeminate. In a 1967 interview with Giles Gordon for *The Translatic Review*, he openly discussed his views on sexuality, specifically referring to a character from his play *Sloane*. He described this character as "a man who was interested in boys and liked having sex with boys." He further explained, "I wanted him played as if he was the most ordinary man in the world, and not as if the moment you wanted sex with boys you had to put on earrings and scent. This is very bad, and I hope that now homosexuality is allowed, people aren't going to continue doing the conventional portraits there have been in the past […] It's compartmentalization."[91] Nonetheless, the couple found themselves navigating the complex and ideologically charged nature of domestic life with deliberate care and attention, as they sought to reconcile ingrained conceptions of masculinity with the outward appearance of being merely "two ordinary boys."[92] If so, then perhaps inevitably, the couple's understanding of intimacy was no longer confined to traditional spatial and bodily proximities. Instead, intimacy became a matter of cohabitation, framed through their evolving perceptions of masculinity and the societal scripts that governed the performance of such roles within a heteronormative-dominated context. As evidenced by Orton's desire to renegotiate their separation by living in different houses, their terms of cohabitation were in a constant state of change—or at least under continual consideration. In other words, what has been referred to as a sleep divorce, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, may have served as a distinct kind of social contract in their case—or, more precisely, an implicit pact—motivated by their desire to coexist, both privately and publicly, particularly given the challenges in their relationship.

When discussing matters of sex, gender, and sexuality, we must acknowledge that these categories differ not only across historical periods but also from one individual to another. The authority they hold in shaping people's lives varies, and their impact on self-perception and self-knowledge is therefore uniquely felt.[93] As such, it is essential to approach these categories with a critical lens, yet also with caution, particularly when examining the life and work of particular individuals. However, one general observation that can be made is that, given the circumstances of the time, the facade of masculinity—commonly upheld by, equally, homosexual and heterosexual men—may elucidate why Orton is seldom recognized today as a 'queer playwright.' This facade, though not uniformly shared by all men, was something to which Orton appears to have been consciously subjected, shaping not only his view of himself but also the way he viewed others. He often expressed misogynistic and racist sentiments. For instance, he once described England as a dreadful place, claiming its morals were higher than those of a Middle Eastern country where he felt he could easily sexually engage with adolescents. Although Orton did not explicitly elaborate on masculinity in his writings—as this was expressed by other men of his time—he often portrayed women with a clear disdain, reducing them to mere commodities.[94] If we take into account that the double bed, as noted by Stratford, serves as a machine for the nuclear family—anchoring women's reproductive roles within the domestic sphere—it is unsurprising that someone like Orton would never mention such an object in his diaries, nor express any need for it within his own domestic setting. Instead, one speculates that he gravitated toward a bed more emblematic of the bachelor's home, a place untouched by the reproductive imperatives of familial life.

91 Christopher Silvester, *The Penguin Book of Interviews: An Anthology from 1859 to the Present Day* (London: Viking, 1993), 515.
92 Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London*, 183.
93 Eve Kosofsky Sedwgick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 26–27.
94 Farrier, "Sticky Stories: Joe Orton, Queer History, Queer Dramaturgy," 188–189.

THE BED (SIT) IN ORTON'S WRITINGS

During the years they lived together, our understanding of Orton and Halliwell's domestic experience is limited. Nevertheless, it is clear that they desired an isolated life. According to Cook and other sources, they largely refrained from participating in London's queer scene, as it is known today, and found contentment within the confines of their home.[95] Yet, it was in this isolation that their creative partnership grew, setting the stage for Orton's writings—be it his diaries or his bold plays, which captured the tensions and contradictions of his life. Many of these works, in various ways, echoed his own domestic setting, alongside detailed observations of the places where he encountered other men. Bedsit scenes, as well as bedrooms, were commonplace in the playwright's writings. Perhaps it is something about the tension between sleep and desire, between the damp linens and the exposed vulnerability of the unclothed or partially clothed body that keeps the reader on edge. In one diary entry, for example, he described a sexual encounter in a bedsit, following his mother's death, suggesting that the bedsit served multiple purposes for homosexual men of the time, beyond temporary or long-term accommodation. The entry reads:

> I picked up an Irishman… He had a room on the ground floor of a large house. The place was damp, not lived in. A smell of dust. He didn't live there. He rented it for sex. There was a table covered in grime. Bits of furniture. A huge masterpiece with broken glass ornaments on it. All dusty. There was a double bed with greyish sheets. A torn eiderdown. He pulled the curtain which seemed unnecessary because the windows were so dirty. He had a white body. Not in good condition. Going to fat. Very good sex, though, surprisingly. The bed had springs which creaked. First time I've experienced that.[96]

In his plays, Orton ridiculed the rigid ideals and moral conservatism of English society. On the Eammon Andrews show, he famously remarked that "Being married […] is like being a baby and having to play with the same rattle always."[97] As literary critic Randall Nakayama points out, Orton consistently defines his identity in opposition to the conventions of his time. [98] His writings—both his diaries and plays—paint him as a figure who not only resists but actively rejects sexual, familial, and domestic conventions. The characters populating Orton's plays, often young men or women adrift in their search for work or a place to live, exist in a state of transition, rarely belonging to stable family units or having lost their families in strange, often unsettling circumstances. In this theatrical realm, Orton intricately weaves coded language and layered subtext, employing *Polari* (from the Italian word "parlare"). This form of slang, predominantly used within homosexual circles, served not merely as a protective device but as a means of mutual recognition among its users. Historian Matt Cook emphasizes that Polari allowed homosexuals to articulate their distinctiveness, functioning simultaneously as a mechanism of concealment and invisibility. Orton's oeuvre is particularly significant for its examination of both latent and overt homosexuality through the lens of farce—a genre frequently perceived as conservative. This alignment with farce can be seen as a strategic response, allowing for the maintenance of an accept-

95 Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London*, 180.

96 Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears: The Biography of Joe Orton*, 64–65.

97 Joe Orton is quoted in Matt Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London* (New York and Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 178.

98 Randall Nakayama is quoted in Matt Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London* (New York and Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 178.

able façade while facilitating indirect discussions about sexuality.[99]

From 1737 to 1968, the Lords Chamberlain, as senior members of the Royal household, held the power to ban plays or require edits, which could include altering, cutting, or even making their own substitutions in scripts. They could also place law officers backstage to intervene if actors strayed from the approved version. Comptrollers appointed by the Lord Chamberlain reviewed each new play, making recommendations on edits or whether a license should be granted. The moral standards they applied were vague, often leading to reports that reduced plays to lists of infractions. Both the submission of a script to the Lord Chamberlain's office and the approval process involved a confidential negotiation, reflecting a controlled and ideologically driven system. In March 1965, *Loot* was under review for licensing, and Comptroller Ifan Kyrle Fletcher submitted a report listing offenses, including blasphemy, offensive remarks about homosexuality, obscene dialogue, and references to voyeurism and flagellation. He ultimately found the play's tone "repellent" and recommended that it not be licensed.[100]

Orton captured the life unfolding around him, borrowing its language and scenarios, then reflected it back to an audience who often believed it to be entirely invented. He once remarked that, "You've got to be sitting on a bus and you'll hear the most stylized lines. People think I write fantasy, but I don't; some things may be exaggerated or distorted in the way some painters distort and alter things, but they're realistic figures. They're perfectly recognizable."[101] This same vision extended to his stage settings, where the most prominent domestic spaces featured in his plays are bedsits or family-owned boarding houses. *The Ruffian on the Stair*, first broadcast on BBC Radio in 1964, exemplified his use of the bedsit as a backdrop for theatrical exploration. Orton adapted it for the stage only after the acclaim of *Loot*, basing it on his novel *The Boy Hairdresser*, co-written with his partner Kenneth Halliwell, and unsurprisingly drawing on aspects of their personal life and creative pursuits. The plot centers on two male protagonists whose turbulent relationship forms the story's core. They share the habit of stealing books—not from libraries, but from bookshops—a recurring act depicted as both rebellion and contribution to the literary world.[102] The narrative unfolded within what appeared to be a cramped "kitchen/living-room with a bedroom alcove," occupied by Mike, a former boxer, and Joyce, his partner and ex prostitute.[103] Joyce hails from London, while Mike, originally from Donegal, depends on welfare to make ends meet. Orton possessed a mischievous flair for phallic humor, using it to boldly critique prevailing attitudes toward sexuality, fearlessly highlighting its excesses and transgressions. Early in the play, when asked by Joyce if he has any appointments, Mike responds, "Yes. I'm to be at King's Cross station at eleven. I'm meeting a man in the toilet." Joyce dryly remarks, "You always go to such interesting places."[104] Mike's life, which is hinted to conceal a mysterious past, is later revealed to involve criminal activities. Despite this revelation, he admits at one point that he had purchased their bedsit "a long time ago" but could no longer afford such "luxury,"[105] suggesting that their home was not a temporary arrangement but a permanent one, dictated by their precarious financial situation, which had led him to resort to unlawful activities. The couple's otherwise monotonous existence is disrupted by the arrival of Wilson, a young man posing as a potential tenant, whose seemingly innocent façade soon re-

99 Read more about the form of Orton's theatrical plays in Stephen Farrier, "Sticky Stories: Joe Orton, Queer History, Queer Dramaturgy," *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, vol. 37, no. 2 (2017): 189–197

100 Colsell, *Malicious Damage: The Defaced Library Books of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton*, 42–43.

101 Joe Orton is quoted in Ilsa Colsell, *Malicious Damage: The Defaced Library Books of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton* (London: Donlon Books, 2013), 43.

102 The main characters, Peterson and Donelly, argued that their theft prompts shops to reorder stock, benefiting publishers, and view themselves as modern-day patrons, or "Maecenas" figures, who as anti-heroes contributed to sustaining literature. Read more in Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell, *Lord Cucumber & The Boy Hairdresser: Two Novels* (London: Methuen, 2001).

103 Orton, "The Ruffian on the Stair," 31.

104 Ibid.

105 Ibid., 49.

veals a menacing edge when he demands to know where Mike keeps his gun, leaving Joyce uneasy. It becomes clear that he had been observing them for some time, yet when Joyce voices her concerns, Mike dismisses them, strangely showing empathy toward Wilson. Later, a series of disturbing noises outside the flat leave Joyce on edge, while Mike remains indifferent, exposing an unsettling detachment from the danger around them. When Wilson returns, Mike, oddly charmed by the intruder, even offers him a place to stay on the bed-settee, saying, "If you're desperate for a room, we could put you up. On the bed-settee. It's quite comfortable."[106]

Wilson's presence stirs memories of his deceased brother, Frank, revealing the depth of their bond. He recalls their time in Shepherd's Bush, where they had shared a small room—likely another bedsit—subsisting on government assistance. The nature of their relationship remains shrouded in ambiguity, as Wilson insists they had "separate beds," yet their constant companionship suggests a connection that ran deeper. Days and nights blurred into one as they savored each other's company, leaving little time for any work to be done. Mike reacts with palpable unease, remarking, "There's no word in the Irish language for what you were doing," to which Wilson retorts, "In Lapland they have no words for snow." Wilson's grief surfaces when he reveals that he was not with Frank when he died, confessing, "I'm going round the twist with heartbreak."[107] Overwhelmed by this distress, he spirals into thoughts of suicide and, in a calculated act of provocation, claims to have slept with Joyce, asserting that he had known her since her days as a prostitute. In truth, it had been Frank, not Wilson, who had been involved with Joyce, and Mike who had killed him. The fabricated affair ignites a tempest of jealousy within Mike, and despite Joyce's fervent denials, he storms out of the flat the next day, agitated and torn. Wilson returns in Mike's absence, setting the stage for a violent confrontation. He undresses and wedges the door shut, hoping to convince Mike, upon his return, that he was in bed with Joyce. When Mike arrives, consumed by rage, he fires twice, the second shot fatally wounding Wilson. Wilson lingers long enough to express his final wish—to be buried next to Frank—before collapsing. The tragic absurdity deepens when Joyce and Mike realize that one of the bullets had shattered Joyce's goldfish bowl, killing the fish inside. Strangely, they are far more distraught over the dead fish than Wilson's lifeless body, and the play closes on this disquieting note of grim irony.

In the play, Orton portrays the bedsit as a stark embodiment of social and psychological confinement, its constrained and oppressive architecture reflecting the characters' stagnant existence, where intimacy and isolation constantly collide. This tension was thrown into sharp relief by the intrusion of Wilson, whose presence unsettled Joyce and Mike's fragile equilibrium and exposed the home's instability—from a refuge to a site of violence. As the drama unfolded, their moral and emotional boundaries grew increasingly vulnerable, transforming the stage into a crucible of absurdity. The accidental death of the goldfish, following Joyce's overwhelming fear and Wilson's eventual downfall, crystallized this disintegration: it revealed the failure of the bedsit to offer refuge, while amplifying the darkly comic and tragic absurdity at the heart of the play. By the end of the play, the narrative alternated between the bedsit of Joyce and Mike and the physical separation of Wilson and his brother, whose shared bedroom revealed a complex portrayal of brotherhood—a theme central to Orton's exploration of companionship. The brothers' twin-bed arrangement, while initially appearing as a mere domestic detail, carried a deeper, almost sinister significance, gradually hinting at incestuous undertones. This arrangement, by its very nature, exposed them to scandal and disapproval, particularly from Mike, who ultimately discovers the truth about Wilson. Though their beds were physically separate, Wilson implied that

106 Ibid.
107 Ibid., 49–50.

this separation concealed their illicit bond, shielding it from external scrutiny. Through these details, Orton hollows out the subjectivities of Wilson and Frank, rendering them legible within a framework of heterosexual consumption. Ultimately, Orton employed the bedsit and the twin beds to explore the fragility of societal norms—particularly around class and sexual identity—laying them bare and revealing the intricate and conflicting desires that defined human existence.

TILL SLEEP DO THEY PART

Today, a visitor to 25 Noel Road in the now-gentrified neighborhood of Islington—an area distinguished by its upscale restaurants, plush bars, and boutique shops—would encounter a green plaque affixed to the building's upper façade. This plaque solemnly declares: "Joe Orton lived here." Yet, this bedsit belonged as much to Orton as it did to Kenneth Halliwell, whose presence was inextricably woven into the fabric of the home they shared and the creative legacies they forged together. The romantic relationship between Orton and Halliwell, whose final moments unfolded in this very former bedsit, side by side next to their beds, reveals a narrative that stretches far beyond the sensationalized account of their tragic end. Their domestic life, unconstrained by social conventions, was shaped instead by a delicate, continuous tension between companionship and independence—an intricate dance largely orchestrated by Orton himself. He expressed a clear understanding of what defined his own sense of family, centered on the idea of a 'marriage' between two brothers, united solely by their mutual desires. Regardless of Orton's disassociation from both the prevailing concerns of homosexual men and women in his time and the emergent political strategies of the gay liberation movement, his life raises fundamental questions about identity formation— how individuals define themselves and negotiate their identities in relation to others within a society that seeks to categorize and control. Orton's refusal to conform—whether in sexual, political, or social terms—mirrors a larger tension at stake, between individual autonomy and collective belonging. He did not merely challenge society's expectations; he resisted the very categories that marginalized groups, including homosexuals, were beginning to embrace. Perhaps, in his anarchic spirit, Orton embodies the "quintessential homosexual," whose desires, while present, are expressed in ways that encapsulate "the contradictions at the heart of respectable 'homosexuality' in the mid-twentieth century."[108]

Undoubtedly, Orton's and Halliwell's challenge to conformity was also expressed in the bedsit they inhabited in a very particular way. While some may regard the idea of queer architecture as a contested or even misguided ideal,[109] and with good reason, it has become evident that queerness does not reside solely in the tangible, formal, or material properties of architecture itself. Homes are not inherently queer, nor do they require any novel typological reinvention to become so. Instead, queerness materializes through acts of inhabitation; it is performed by the ways the rooms of a house are occupied, configured, and reimagined in deliberate opposition to normative social and spatial regimes by those who dwell within them.

108 The phrase "quintessential homosexual," as articulated by Matt Houlbrook, highlights the contradictions evident among homosexuals of that era—individuals who did not have to fight for their survival or livelihoods but instead embodied conventional masculinity and private lives, with their difference expressed solely through their choice of sexual partners. Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918–1957* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 218.

109 George Chauncey claimed that there is no such thing as a "queer space," but "only spaces used by queers or put to queer use." For further exploration of this argument, refer to George Chauncey, "Privacy Could Only Be Had in Public: Gay Uses of the Streets," in *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*, ed. Joel Sanders (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 224–260.

Detail of the murals on the bedsitting-room walls, 1962.
Courtesy of Islington Archives.

From this perspective, Orton and Halliwell's queerness, as it would be interpreted today, extends beyond the transgressive nature of their illicit partnership. It lies in the familiarity and use of their own selves, as well as in the use of the space around them.[110] In other words, it is embedded in a series of deliberate and subtle acts that shaped both their lives and their home, allowing their everyday existence to take root in a defiantly self-determined manner. These aspects introduce a form of queerness that is more attuned to the rhythms of the everyday, with all its tensions and contradictions. Their bedsit, at its core a modest and speculative housing type designed to accommodate the working class, became for the couple—and perhaps many others—a microcosm of quiet resistance. Despite their inherent precariousness, bedsits were the dominant domestic setting for less-privileged homosexuals in large British cities throughout much of the twentieth century. This prevalence can be attributed not only to the relative security these accommodations offered but also to their notable invisibility.[111] While it would be unreasonable to claim that bedsits—retaining the original façades of the Georgian and Victorian periods—were not typologically distinct, they served a wide array of domestic functions within a single room. These conditions, among others, encouraged homosexuals to assert their agency in new and profound ways, all while operat-

110 Giorgio Agamben, when discussing self-agency, claimed that: "[T]he self coincides each time with the relation itself and not with a predetermined telos. And if use, in the sense that we have seen, means being affected, constituting oneself insofar as one is in relation with something, then use-of-oneself coincides with *oikeiosis*, insofar as this term names the very mode of being of the living being. The living being uses-itself, in the sense that in its life and in its entering into relationship with what is other than the self, it has to do each time with its very self, feels the self and familiarizes itself with itself. The self is nothing other than use-of-oneself." Read more in Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (California: Stanford University Press, 2016), 55.

111 Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918–1957*, 134.

ing within the constraints of imposed legal limitations. The development of homophile social networks, however, was propelled by a deliberate effort to dissociate from the city's so-called "social sewers." The aim was to cultivate a way of life that resonated with the principles of "discretion, privacy, and respectability." This aspiration found expression in the idealization of domestic space as a sanctuary—a place of serenity, isolation, and refuge. As a result, whether living alone, with a partner, or among friends, homosexual lives during that time increasingly gravitated around the private sphere.[112]

Aside from the notorious circumstances surrounding their deaths, it is within the couple's bed-sitting room that one finds the most critical vantage for understanding the layered complexities of their relationship and the deeper relevance of their queerness. This room was not merely a place where domestic functions inevitably converged, nor simply where the walls bore traces of the occupants' physical presence. It was the arena for their non-conforming selves; a site of continual negotiation and redefinition of their bond, where they navigated the dualities of being together, and yet apart. Orton's diaries and literary works reflect this ongoing interplay, exploring intimacy outside the confines of heteronormative, as well as homonormative imperatives. Even the presence of other lovers, particularly Orton's occasional encounters with other men further emphasizes this dynamic, revealing a relationship in flux, with constantly renegotiated emotional and physical boundaries, much like the relationships of the characters in his plays. Far from incidental, the disposition of their beds within the constrained space of the bed-sitting room is emblematic of broader questions about homosexuality, kinship, and domesticity, compelling us to reconsider how, even today, the domestic interior both shapes and is shaped by relational dynamics. For a society quick to dismiss such arrangements as "an invention of the Devil, jealous of married bliss,"[113] and symbolic of the decline of human relationships, Orton and Halliwell's union thrived on this very separation—a separation marked by both harmony and conflict. This condition revealed its truest expression in the horizontal architecture of their bedsit, where the L-shaped arrangement of the beds and the murals—dense and overflowing at first, then gradually thinning—became the living backdrop to their shared, everyday life. Theirs was no fantasy but rather, as Philip Hoare described, a "society of two."[114] In another version of events, their story might have found a gentler conclusion. Had fate taken a different turn or had those lingering specters that haunted Halliwell—or perhaps even Orton—been somehow lifted, their domestic interior might have been reimagined entirely. Books borrowed in fleeting reverie might have found their way back to the public library, hinting at a reconciliation with the world outside; walls, now left stark, might have been adorned again with the meticulous collages they once crafted together; and those two single beds, drawn closer, might have bridged the divide, embracing the more conventional arrangement of communal rest. Yet, it is within the poignancy of their paradoxical ending that we are left to contemplate how alternative forms of companionship—untamed, unbound—might find their place within the home, and, perhaps most evocatively, within the bounds of the bedroom.

112 Ibid., 206.

113 Marie Stopes, a prominent figure known for her advocacy of birth control pills, her eugenicist views, and her authorship of several influential marital advice books, sharply criticized the adoption of twin beds by heterosexual couples. To her, these beds symbolized the decline of human relationships under the pressures of modernity. Marie Stopes is cited in Hilary Hinds, *A Cultural History of Twin Beds* (London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 150.

114 Philip Hoare, "A Genius Like Us," in Ilsa Colsell, *Malicious Damage: The Defaced Library Books of Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton* (London: Donlon Books, 2013), 13.

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