

Book Review

Women's University Fiction, 1880-1945

Anna Bogen

London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014

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In *Women's University Fiction, 1880-1945*, Anna Bogen sets out to challenge interpretations of women's university fiction as flat or failed. Her sophisticated literary analysis of early 20th-century university fiction, or coming-of-age fiction within the Oxbridge (University of Oxford in Oxford, England, and University of Cambridge in Cambridge, England) setting, adds to our understanding of women's place in the university and demonstrates how gender affects genre. Bogen sees university fiction as a particular subgenre of *Bildungsroman* in which the main character reaches self-realization and an independent subject position through education. Comparing men's and women's novels, Bogen argues that women's exclusion from the center of university life made it difficult for women authors to comfortably fit their narratives into the traditional *Bildungsroman* structure. However, rather than jettison the genre, women authors used it to expose women's marginality in the university and in the process, exposed the genre's tensions. Bogen's texts include those that received critical analyses, such as Compton Mackenzie's foundational *Sinister Street* (1913), Virginia Woolf's "A Woman's College from the Outside" (1926), and Rosamond Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* (1927) as well as texts that many critics ignored. Bogen's book complements Elaine Showalter's *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (2005), an examination of university fiction after World War II, but it is the first sustained analysis of early 20th-century women's university fiction in England.

Bogen successfully contextualizes the university novel within the variety of challenges modernity posed to late 19th-century universities but her central concern is women's place in the university as they began to attend in large numbers. Although separated in women's colleges like Girton, women studied at Oxford and Cambridge as early as 1869. They still faced "trenchant opposition" (p. 16), including a quota system to limit their numbers at Oxford, which was in force until the 1920s. University administrations barred women from voting faculty positions and from extracurricular activities, and women coped with prevailing fears that learning eroded women's health. Mass enlistments of Oxbridge men during World War I and evolving sexual attitudes that reflected popular psychology prompted further female enrollments. Women finally earned Oxford degrees in 1920 and full equal membership at Cambridge in 1948. Before then, the women's colleges had only unofficial recognition. Women might have been permitted to sit for exams but it was largely at the discretion of male dons and women earned only titular degrees. Thus Oxbridge accorded women educational opportunities outside the home, a central feature of *Bildungsroman*, but because women remained marginalized within institutions of higher learning, self-discovery and social integration were only partially possible for women.

Although some feminist scholars object that the female *Bildungsroman* was impossible due to such patriarchal limits on women's education before the late-20th century, Bogen contends that women authors retained the structure (sometimes awkwardly) and "used it to acerbically comment on the female student experience" (p. 166). Since the content of women's novels was inconsistent with the mythic celebratory form of the masculine university novel, women authors adapted the form, drawing attention to the false presumption of the "normal" maturity gained from college experience. One strategy shifted the location of *Bildung*, or self-realization, away from the patriarchal university where men's fiction situated their steady progress toward maturity. Bogen writes, "Female texts, by virtue of women students' differing circumstances, expose the cracks in the Oxbridge novel's formal integrity and allow us to glimpse what is often quite radical content" (p. 170). Bogen's first chapter defines the *Bildungsroman* and sketches women's intervention in the genre. The next six chapters explore that radical content across the themes of liberal education, religion, residence, politics, literary culture, and sexuality.

In Chapter 2, Bogen effectively pairs Mackenzie's *Sinister Street*, a man's work, with Barbara Silver's *Our Young Barbarians* (1935), a woman's novel, to show that gender shaped university fiction's representation of liberal education, with women's works implicitly challenging traditional models of education. Once reserved for cultivating gentlemen through studies that prized broad ideas and critical thinking above specific and practical training, British universities admitted more students from the middle classes and more women who demanded practical knowledge and training for careers. However, Mackenzie still presented the benefits of traditional abstract education as universal. Women writers like Silver, however, diverged from the narrative of liberal education to emphasize content acquisition and empirical research. Implicit was a challenge to the Oxbridge emphasis on abstract ideas over facts. Although critics charged Silver with provincialism, Bogen suggests her work is more revelatory.

Religion at Oxbridge and its representation in university fiction is the subject of Chapter 3. Women's university fiction such as Gertrude Winifred Taylor's *The Pearl* (1917) and Mary Wilkes' *The Only Door Out* (1945) displays how religious experimentation, a coming of age ritual granted to male students when it respected the historic ties between the church and the university, was deemed dangerous for women. Religion, however, "offered the possibility of a supportive community *outside* of university life for some women students" (p. 57, emphasis in original). Thus, women's university fiction located religious self-realization outside the university. In *The Only Door Out*, the woman subject cannot reconcile her position relative to religion and education within the university and does so only when she joins a convent.

In her layered and nuanced Chapter 4, Bogen examines issues of class, gender, and residence. She pairs two prewar texts, *A College Girl* (1914) by female author Jessie Vaizey and *Years of Plenty* (1915) by male author Ivor Brown against two post-World War I women's texts, Ruth Goldrings' *Educating Joanna* (1935) and Mary Sturt's *Be Gentle to the Young* (1937). For women students, leaving the home to take up residence at the university—a central component of the *Bildungsroman*—was complicated by women's historic connection to the domestic sphere. Introducing the concept of locality, Bogen conveys the importance of town and gown connections in university fiction. In *Years of Plenty*, the male protagonist has an affair with a local working-class woman. Although the text implies she may be a prostitute, contained within the university experience, the affair is a temporary digression and not a threat to the young man's respectability. Indeed, it allows the reintroduction of women and heterosexuality into the homosocial educational institution and therefore serves to promote masculine maturity. By contrast, "for the female student, proving one's respectability involved regulating one's

movements and one's relation to the local space that surrounded the university" (p. 91). The 1930s novels go on to highlight the betwixt and between position of women students living in proximity to the university. In *Educating Joanna*, the local sister of a male student represents women's lack of access to Oxbridge education, and home-students, or women students who attend lectures but not as full college residents, illustrate women's ongoing ties to home spaces. As the city of Oxford industrialized, and the student body expanded, the complexities of space, class, and gender only grew. For Bogen, it is women's university fiction that uncovers spatial tensions in the writings of both women and men.

Chapter 5 examines the notion of the self after World War I in one man's text, Gerard Hopkins' *City on the Foreground* (1921) and two women's texts, Vera Brittain's *The Dark Tide* (1923) and Renée Haynes' *Neapolitan Ice* (1928), all set in Oxford and Cambridge. In both men's and women's fiction, the expectation that an integrated self matures to accept a place in the community through Oxbridge education grew increasingly problematic. As Oxbridge men "stampeded" (p. 111) to war service, Oxbridge administrators urged women not to serve. Although excluded, this created some academic opportunities for women who in 1916 outnumbered men among students and found broader acceptance as lecturers. Hopkins' protagonist moves only awkwardly toward maturity; in deciding to go to war he adopts a community cause but his choice follows great uncertainty and occurs outside the bounds of the university. For women, the problem of self-realization was magnified. In *The Dark Tide*, women return from war service to find that war, marriage, and proximity to death (not university learning) promote growth of the self. Bogen finds *Neapolitan Ice*, which uses the metaphor of the tri-flavoured ice cream to depict a feminine split self, is the most successful of the postwar texts because it challenges the notion that university fosters integrated selfhood and redefines a coherent self beyond it.

Through the male-authored *Patchwork* (1921) by Beverly Nichols and *Rosy-Fingered Dawn* (1934) by female author Rose-Marie Hodgson, which are two metafictional works wherein the authors' semi-autobiographical accounts turn the readers' attention to the artificiality of the traditional narrative strategy, Chapter 6 explores Oxbridge's snobbish masculine interwar literary culture and the stereotype that women's writing was unoriginal and middlebrow. *Patchwork*, Bogen argues, documents how Oxbridge literary culture advanced men's literary careers. Women, however, positioned as old-fashioned, outside the creative avant-garde, and prevalent among the reputedly less rigorous English majors, actually produced more experimental *Bildungsroman*. Hodgson's *Rosy-Fingered Dawn*, the most experimental of the novels Bogen examines, "forces us to see [Hodgson] as more than a documentary writer" or the stereotyped serious but unoriginal woman student and therefore, challenges the "second-rate conception of the middlebrow" (p. 139).

Bogen's final chapter examines how university novels represented and mediated popular fears about masculinity and femininity through interrogations of sexuality. Popular images of the Girton girl or the educated woman of Oxford's Girton College cast doubt on her presumed heterosexuality. The educated new woman was depicted as unwilling to make herself attractive for men. By contrast, popular images showed men as losing their vitality and strength through effeminate institutions. The male-authored *Une Culotte, or, a New Woman: An Impossible Story of Modern Oxford* (1894) by Tivoli, and the female-authored *The Girls of Merton College* (1911) by L. T. Meade explore the construction of sexuality in this context. In Tivoli's novel, two Girton women dress as men and go to Oxford to see women from the perspective of men and in the process discover, and reveal to the reader, that male college students are strong and fit.

Thus, through cross-dressing and gender play, readers are assured that gender ambiguity associated with university life was not as problematic as some critics suggested. Meade's novels are much less willing to adopt radical postures, although Meade herself was a new woman. Here, Bogen provides a new reading of Meade's rule-following women characters. According to Bogen, rather than promote patriarchy, Meade merely documents the strict rules monitoring dress, chaperonage, and movement that university women endured. Bogen contends that Meade "reconfigures the identity of the Girton Girl in a positive way—rather than a relation between a transgressive body and impure mind, we have a modestly clad and attractive body reflecting an intellectual mind" (p. 150). Positioning the conventionally attractive woman as smart is, in this context, transformational.

Next, Bogen shows how Rosamond Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* (1927), a woman's university novel, provides a more complex understanding of sexuality than that of G. E. Trevelyan's *Hot House* (1933), a work by a man. Bogen contextualizes the two texts in the postwar cultural discourse around sexuality that included a lesbian subculture, women's political rights, vibrant urban life, new psychological theories, and the disillusionment of the war. Although greater legitimacy was granted to women's desires and university regulations such as chaperonage seemed outdated, the "modern girl" still faced "contradictory sexual expectations" (p. 154). Additionally, the growing 1920s association of the university woman with circumstantial female homosexuality or same-sex love-affairs prompted by an all-female setting led these postwar novels to investigate such women's communities. "*Dusty Answer* ultimately presents sexuality as a problematic but necessary part of *Bildung*, [but] this association is no longer possible for *Hot House*, which is significantly unable to connect maturity even contingently to college life" (p. 164). In *Hot House*, the university community appears as sexually unhealthy, pushing the protagonist toward a homosexual relationship she does not desire. Her own voice becomes silenced and she commits suicide, a sign that self-development associated with the *Bildungsroman* has failed.

Through her detailed analysis, Bogen demonstrates the university novel's central role in reflecting and shaping the intense changes that characterized the university for late 19th- and early 20th-century women students. The form grappled with the significant educational debates of the period not only about women's place in the university but also about the significance of liberal education for a widening college-bound population. Bogen's comparative analysis of men's and women's texts and her ability to trace them through time enable her to develop more completely the degree to which the novels' structural problems resulted from a distinct gendered experience. Bogen's work, always careful to distinguish between the historical and the literary past, will appeal to scholars interested in university culture and in how gender shapes educational experience and the *Bildungsroman* genre.

References

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