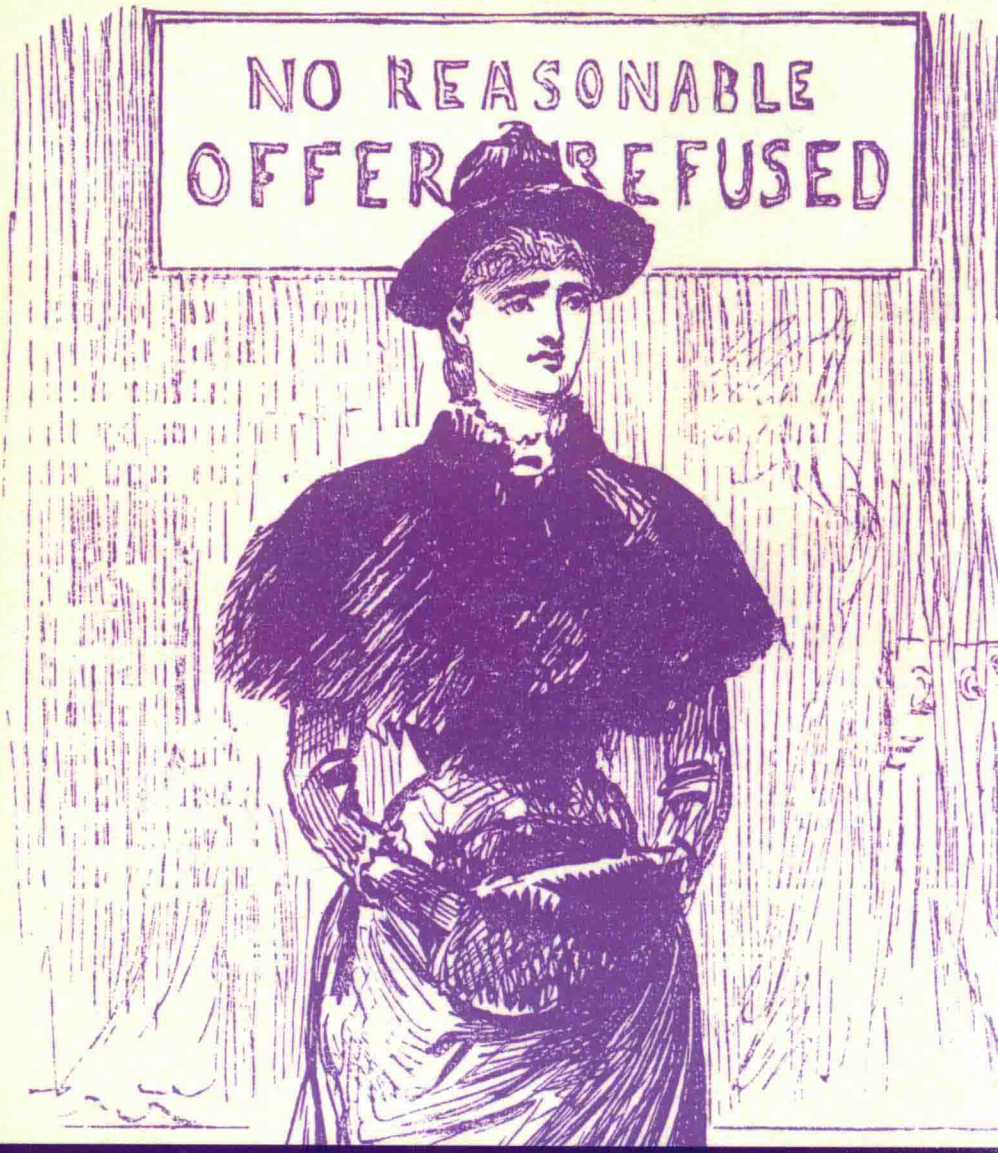

ODD WOMEN?

SPINSTERS [redacted] WIDOWS IN
BRITISH W[redacted] 1850s–1930s

EMMA LIGGINS

Odd women?

Spinsters, lesbians and widows in British women's fiction, 1850s–1930s

Emma Liggins

Manchester University Press
Manchester and New York
distributed in the United States exclusively
by Palgrave Macmillan

Published by Manchester University Press
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9NR, UK
and Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA
www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

Distributed in the United States exclusively by
Palgrave Macmillan, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York,
NY 10010, USA

Distributed in Canada exclusively by
UBC Press, University of British Columbia, 2029 West Mall,
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z2

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for

ISBN 978 0 7190 8756 1 hardback

First published 2014

Typeset 11/13 Bembo Std
by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed in Great Britain
by TJ International Ltd, Padstow

Odd women?

Manchester University Press

Acknowledgements

I would especially like to thank Margaret Beetham, Ginette Carpenter, Kristin Ewins, Faye Hammill, Antony Rowland and Deborah Wynne for offering invaluable advice and much-needed corrections to draft chapters. Berthold Schoene helpfully commented on the project in its early stages. I have also benefited from the insights of researchers working on the *fin de siècle*, queer theory and female modernisms, in particular Lorna Shelley, Caroline Baylis-Green, Helen Nicholson, Michael Lee, Kirsty Bunting, Nadine Muller, Emma Sterry, Emma Short, Katherine Cooper and Carolyn Oulton. Feedback from audiences at women's writing conferences, and at the North-West Long Nineteenth-Century Seminar and the Northern Modernism Seminar, has enabled me to refine and develop my ideas, and I'm grateful to Katherine Holden and Bill Greenslade for being so enthusiastic and spurring me on when I gave a research seminar at the University of the West of England in 2013.

The completion of the book was made possible by research leave granted by Manchester Metropolitan University. My thanks are also due to my colleagues in the English Department at Manchester Metropolitan University, particularly Sue Zlosnik, Jess Edwards, Linnie Blake and Angelica Michelis, for their generosity and support, when I needed extra time to work on this project, or was struggling with the demands of research and child-care. Special thanks to Adam Rounce, for patiently answering my never-ending queries about how to use a computer. Sarah McCall, Cathy Devine, Elana Jowell, Dawn Cole, Warren Osborne and Claire Wakefield have all been brilliant at entertaining my two girls, Polly and Clara Rowland, whilst I stared at the screen. I am also grateful to Polly and Clara for never pressing 'Delete' when it was their turn on the lap-top.

The editorial team at Manchester University Press have been supportive and professional throughout the process. Staff at Manchester

Metropolitan University Library, the John Rylands Library, Manchester Central Library, the British Library and the Women's Library have always been helpful and efficient.

Earlier versions of some of the material in Chapter 2 first appeared in *Women's Writing* 19:1 (2011) and in Carolyn Oulton and Adrienne Gavin (eds.), *Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle: Authors of Change* (Palgrave, 2011). The discussion of Evelyn Sharp is also reprinted from Emma Liggins, Andrew Maunder and Ruth Robbins, *The British Short Story* (Palgrave, 2010). I am grateful to Taylor & Francis and Palgrave for permission to reproduce material.

Contents

Introduction

> The girl who doesn't marry . . . is in no way different, physically, mentally, emotionally, from the girl who does marry. The law of numbers is against her, nothing else . . . She has within her all the wholesome instincts of her age and sex. Whether she analyses the situation for herself or not, she wants to fall in love and make a home with a man and have children by him. If she didn't have these instincts, conscious or unconscious, we should draw away from her, instantly, instinctively, as if we were confronted with something abnormal, perverted, unnatural. Yet when, through living in a country where there are more women than men, she becomes 'odd woman out', what do we expect of her? Nothing less than that she should wipe out of herself all these instincts and wishes and feelings that we so highly approve in her if she marries.
>
> Clemence Dane, *The Women's Side* (1926)[1]

The woman outside heterosexual marriage in the second half of the nineteenth century, often derided as an abnormality, was variously classified as redundant, superfluous, anomalous, incomplete, odd. Paradoxically, she could also be seen as 'new', modern, the woman of the future. From the era of the New Woman to the outbreak of the Second World War, she was increasingly seen as a misfit, an outcast, an outsider, a queer presence in a Britain governed by heterosexual norms. The woman without heterosexual desire, or a domestic space shared with a husband and children, was stigmatised as 'abnormal, perverted, unnatural'. Yet the outsider status of lesbians, spinsters and widows could, and often did, allow them to transgress the norms of female behaviour and to stretch the rules governing sexuality which hemmed in conventional wives and mothers. Despite the moral panic about lesbianism, argues Rita Felski, the pathologised lesbian functioned as an exotic, a 'heroine of the modern',[2] liberated from the

straitjacket of marriage. In Virginia Woolf's feminist polemic *Three Guineas* (1938) outsiders can experiment with new behaviours 'owing to their comparative freedom from certain inhibitions and persuasions'; though she uses the term to encompass the daughters of educated men of the post-war period, it can be applied to unattached middle-class women from the mid-Victorian period onwards.[3]

This study seeks to examine the ways in which the queerness and abnormality of the single woman within British women's writing between the 1850s and the 1930s served to disrupt and denaturalise what Judith Butler has referred to as the regulatory practices of compulsory heterosexuality and gender stability.[4] This time-span facilitates an exploration of the continuities and dialogues between Victorian and modernist texts, tracing the evolution of spinsters, lesbians and widows on either side of key events in twentieth-century history such as the outbreak of the First World War and the obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall's novel in 1928. Associations with lesbians and female communities, and independence from male control, lent spinsters and widows a disruptive queerness, which threatened 'the compulsory order of sex/gender/desire'.[5] These odd women, positioned outside heteronormativity, albeit in different ways, not only challenged ideologies of middle-class femininity and sexuality, but also helped to reinvent them. In novels, stories, autobiographies and feminist polemic, women writers from Charlotte Brontë to Virginia Woolf shifted attention away from the conventional wife and mother towards the odd woman, whose eccentricity became a means of testing out new possibilities for female subjectivity. In his reading of nineteenth-century plots, Alex Woloch emphasises the 'disruptive, oppositional role' played by eccentric minor characters, whose narrative subordination, often linked to social subordination, usually means that they are 'wounded, exiled, expelled, ejected, imprisoned, or killed'.[6] Whilst before 1850 spinsters, lesbians and widows were usually minor characters who were expelled, their status within British women's fiction changed in the period under discussion here, so that their eccentricity came to be valued, diffused or integrated into alternative versions of the normal. This process can usefully be mapped onto the history of feminism from the 1850s onwards, in that representations of the odd woman reflected and responded to political campaigning around issues such as higher education, the vote, women's work, contraception and

divorce, often exposing the difficulties of implementing feminist change.

Queer subjectivities and relations 'between women'

At a time when the word 'queer' in a literary text denoted eccentricity and abnormality, as well as, but not always, signalling sexual alterity, it is productive to see figures such as the spinster and the widow as queer presences, challenging the system through their 'gender dissonance'[7]. The labels of 'queer' and 'odd' are used almost interchangeably from the mid-Victorian period onwards to signal a disruption to the norm, with the marker 'odd woman' acquiring some of the radicalism of the *fin-de-siècle* New Woman. New Woman writers such as Amy Levy and George Gissing shifted the meanings of the word 'odd' towards a more enabling refusal of conventions, associating it particularly with the independent professional woman; as I have argued elsewhere, Levy's *The Romance of a Shop* (1888) and Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) validate the oddity of the 'Glorified Spinster' in order to align her with modernity and female urbanism.[8] Adrienne Rich's familiar notion of 'compulsory heterosexuality'[9] impacts on the study of the single woman by raising new questions about gender 'coherence' and the reification of heteronormativity, and about how this might produce and sustain 'abnormality' or gender nonconformity within a given system. Judith Halberstam's demand for 'new and self-conscious affirmations of different gender taxonomies' reiterates the need for queer critics to 'recognize and ratify differently gendered bodies and subjectivities'.[10] The acknowledgement of 'gender variance', she argues, would 'allow for the multiple histories of nonnormative subjects'; examples of masculinity in women, one form of queer subjectivity, cannot all be collapsed into lesbian identity.[11] This troubled and troubling opposition between the heteronormative and the abnormal has informed my analysis of the relationship between the 'odd' woman as a fictional heroine, or an auto/biographical subject, and contemporary non-fictional discourses addressing the material and political realities of living outside heterosexual marriage.

Judith Butler's argument that 'the limits of the discursive analysis of gender presuppose and pre-empt the possibilities of imaginable and

realizable gender configurations within culture'[12] is apposite to a reimagining of the single woman and the nature of her threat:

> Precisely because certain kinds of 'gender identities' fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as development failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain. Their persistence and proliferation, however, provide critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of [the heterosexual matrix] and, hence, to open up within the very terms of that matrix . . . rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder.[13]

Butler's recognition of these 'rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder' which operate from within the domain of compulsory heterosexuality is useful in terms of rethinking how women positioned outside heterosexual marriage might have challenged the system from within, even as they were publicly derided for their failure to conform. The mapping of gender nonconformity, however constrained and tenuous, in women's writing of this period is therefore revealing of the gradual extension of 'culturally intelligible notions of identity'. Sharon Marcus has urged us to pose different questions about the extent to which nineteenth-century 'women's lives [were] totally governed by heterosexuality', in order to reconsider what female pairings might look like 'once we abandon the preconception of strict divisions between men and women, homosexuality and heterosexuality, same-sex bonds and those of family and marriage'.[14] Our understanding of the potentially radical nature of the challenge to the heterosexual economy mounted by women writing about spinsters, lesbians and widows between 1850 and 1939 remains limited if we too readily accept that odd women in fact and fiction were always already constrained by pervasive social pressures to conform. Rather, what has been construed as alterity and oddity had already been accommodated to changing perceptions of the normal: to develop Marcus's thesis about social acceptance of female marriage in the mid-Victorian period, lesbians, mistresses and other sexually active unattached women were not always as shocking as cultural narratives might suggest. Marcus writes of feeling trapped by the limitations of the heterosexual matrix, 'caught in its terms', whereas a rethinking of same-sex alliances suggests that 'heterosexual gender itself no

longer seemed an adequate concept for understanding the Victorian past'.[15] Going beyond the heterosexual matrix is necessary in order to complicate over-simplified versions of an odd/normal dichotomy.

Historical studies of spinsterhood have tended to locate singleness in social change after the First World War,[16] or to offer only partial visions of the development of the family and female alliances from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Martha Vicinus's valuable study of single women, activism and female communities between 1850 and 1920 pays more attention to religious sisterhoods, which are rarely represented in fiction, than to women's clubs and feminist organisations.[17] Sheila Jeffreys's thesis that between 1880 and 1930 all spinsters were pathologised as lesbians has been challenged by Jane Garrity, who sees this cultural equivalence as 'over-stated'.[18] In an article on 'Our Single Women' of 1862, the Christian poet Dora Greenwell, noting the spate of recent publications on the single sisterhood, claimed that spinsters currently enjoyed 'a literature of their own . . . abounding in hints, suggestions, and schemes for their favourable consideration'.[19] This literature of the surplus woman, which has been skimmed over by historians, clearly predated the First World War by at least fifty years and should inform our understandings of marital status and perceptions of spinsterhood as a stigmatised identity. One way to account for the inferiority of the single state in Britain between 1914 and 1960, Katherine Holden elaborates, is to recognise that 'the loss of freedom that women experienced in marriage was . . . mediated by projecting a sense of loss onto unmarried women and ignoring the potential benefits of singleness'.[20] It is productive to conceptualise marriage and singleness not as binary oppositions but as 'a continuum that places some women as more married than others . . . divorced, widowed, and cohabiting women have not been in the same position as those who have never married or lived in an intimate partnership with a man'.[21] The inequalities between different categories of single women, who often shared communities, households and/or public spaces, yet were positioned in divergent ways to the wife and mother, partly inspired this project. Tracking the correspondences and differences between spinster, widow and lesbian identities allows for a re-examination of the distinct nature of the threat that they, and their communities, posed to the heterosexual economy from the mid-Victorian period to the Second World War.

Moreover, it is timely to explore and account for the relative invisibility of widows in the historical record, for their bonds with spinsters, living arrangements and function in war-time remain under-researched.[22] The invisibility and obscurity of widows, according to Cynthia Curran, and the fact that 'they had no organized assistance indicates that the domestic ideal was too important to the Victorians to admit its failure', though her belief that this makes them into the 'quiet victims' of the nineteenth-century family is rather one-dimensional.[23] Research on mourning has shown how, during the two-and-a-half-year period following a husband's death, Victorian widows had a limited social circle, and were visibly differentiated by wearing black and other mourning colours. The serious 'problem of a widow's sexuality', which was seen as contaminated, meant that remarriage was a risk.[24] On their limited resources, spinsters often cohabited with widows, most often their mothers but sometimes sisters or friends,[25] indicating that the stifling relationship between widowed mother and spinster daughter of women's fiction, which is reconsidered in Chapter 3, on modernist spinster narratives, had its roots in reality. In her sociological study of widowhood in the twentieth-century USA, Helena Znaniecka Lopata notes the 'heterogeneity of widowed women' which makes easy answers to questions of identity elusive: 'Do women lose or gain status in widowhood? Has modernization benefited widows? Are widows valued in . . . society? Are there extensive family support networks available to widowed women?'[26] The relationship between widowhood, modernity and the urban sheds light on the operation of the female-headed household and the widow's role within the community. British war widows tend to be either ignored or seen as unambiguous. However, Holden's model of 'imaginary widowhood', denoting the prevalent 'single women's "might-have-married" identity' in post-war Britain,[27] has been a valuable one for exploring inter-war spinsterhood. It is useful in relation to representations of unorthodox femininity in the work of Vera Brittain, bereaved of her fiancé in the war, as well as more broadly in terms of the myths of 'the lost generation of women deprived of the chance to marry and have children'.[28]

Relationships 'between women' have increasingly become the focus of feminist and queer enquiry, which builds on the biographical work

on female partnerships, women's communities and romantic friendships begun by historians of sexuality such as Lillian Faderman and Martha Vicinus in the 1980s.[29] The 'sister narrative' in the nineteenth-century novel is now under investigation, as are the dynamics of passing as male, whilst the publication of previously undisclosed autobiographical writing by women has shown many more examples of lesbian partnerships, female marriages and other homosocial alliances.[30] Recent work on female friendship has emphasised its variability and fluidity, in spite of sexological warnings about the dangers of excessive same-sex intimacy. Carolyn W. De la L. Oulton has evidenced 'the lengths nineteenth-century texts go to in order to expel any . . . threat' of erotic exchange between female friends, so that, in Victorian accounts of romantic friendship, 'the ideal is only viable as long as the relationship remains within the realms of the non-erotic'.[31] The consistent pattern she identifies in Victorian fiction, where 'intense feeling is celebrated, provided it is kept within safe limits; subversive sexuality . . . is summarily expelled and the dissident figure destroyed',[32] will be reworked in twentieth-century plots in which female dissidence may find other outlets. In her more biographical study of friendship amongst inter-war women writers, Catherine Clay demonstrates that 'the complex territory for women's friendships in inter-war Britain', partly produced by the 'fashioning of sapphism', meant that bonds between women 'sustained the possibility of shared erotic interests and/or intense desires for intimacy that dared not be fully acknowledged or named'.[33]

In this study I am less interested in pairings between female friends and sisters than in the variable intimacies between women of different generations, particularly the relationships between widowed mother and home daughter and between aunt and niece and the paradigm of the older woman and the younger woman. Such unequal alliances tend to function in terms of rivalry, repression and antagonism as much as an excessive intimacy which might need policing, inviting psychoanalytic readings of cross-generational interactions. Denis Flannery suggests that 'both queer theory and related modes of writing have situated the family as a site of repudiation, a site from which the queer subject is expelled'.[34] Yet his readings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American texts demonstrate that 'queer

subjectivity can be both negotiated and learned through siblinghood. Queer narratives have a need of the figure of the sibling, a need most powerfully evident in that figure's repudiation.'[35] The 'shadowy, disruptive, facilitating or mourned sibling',[36] and, by extension, other forgotten family members such as aunts or grandmothers, become necessary in the formulation of a queer narrative, steering the unmarried heroine away from heterosexual marriage. As Flannery maintains, the 'placement of queer life within the family' sabotages 'the right-wing narrative of queer life as anti-familial, anti-natural and as preying on children'.[37] Both lesbian fiction and spinster fiction privilege mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, grandmothers and sometimes female servants within the household, banishing suitors, fathers, brothers and ex-husbands to the sidelines. The mother–daughter bond in Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* is typically figured as 'almost grotesque, this shyness of theirs, as existing between mother and child . . . [Anna] would awake at night and ponder this thing, scourging herself in an access of contrition; accusing herself of hardness of spirit, of being an unnatural mother . . . back would come flooding that queer antagonism that amounted almost to anger'.[38] This 'queer', emotionally detached, 'unnatural' bond is exacerbated in women's modernist fiction by the widowing of the mother, which locks the eldest or only daughter into this strange alliance.

For the spinster heroine, the aunt variously functions as an alter ego, a nightmare of repression and frustration and/or a supportive presence, both advertising and warning against female singleness. The childless widow can also be accommodated into the maternal through assuming the responsibilities of an aunt, both emotional and financial, with aunt–niece alliances sometimes mirroring those of relations between mistress and servant or between adoptive mother and daughter. The disruptive, asymmetrical position of the aunt has been linked to new understandings of *fin-de-siècle* sexual dissidence; she can be seen to 'introduce the possibility of other kinds of relations between women' and 'to trouble normative heterosexuality'.[39] Yopie Prins's suggestive notion of 'the tantular'[40] (and by extension, the grandmotherly) is crucial to mapping these 'other kinds' of same-sex relations, becoming increasingly important in 1930s narratives which grant the older woman more textual space and a stronger voice, in order to evaluate generational change for women after the vote was won.

Queering the heterosexual plot

Definitions of the 'lesbian novel' and the potential limitations imposed by its inevitable dependence on the heterosexual plot have been a major concern of queer theorists from the 1990s onwards. Whilst lesbian fictions may seem 'odd, fantastical, implausible, "not there"',[41] Terry Castle has argued that their depictions of female-only worlds, as well as their revisions of realist heterosexual stories, offer new possibilities for narrative and twentieth-century femininity. Julie Abraham has noted the 'ideological limitations' of modern lesbian writing, produced by the availability of recognisably modern lesbian identities in Britain and the USA by the beginning of the twentieth century but leaving lesbian writers facing 'a particular narrative disenfranchisement' in their attempts to resist 'heterosexual narrative hegemony'.[42] Although she concedes that the heterosexual plot could be 'queered from within', or that heterosexual women writers could write beyond its constraints, Abraham's argument is that the lesbian novel before 1960 cannot escape a plot which constructs lesbianism as 'problem' and heterosexuality as the norm: 'the subject of the lesbian novel is always, in a sense, the problem of not-heterosexuality, which is to say, finally, that the subject of the lesbian novel remains, like the subject of all other novels about women, heterosexuality'.[43] But to argue that the lesbian novel before 1960 is limited and limiting because of its inability to escape from the heterosexual system underestimates what women writers may have been trying to achieve in their commentaries on women's sexual choices. Whilst the drive towards compulsory heterosexuality did permeate British culture before 1960, it is incorrect to assert that all novels about women, or by women, are *about* heterosexuality, as many of the texts under discussion here, whilst acknowledging heteronormativity, also challenge it through representations of celibacy, maternity, family bonds and/or same-sex partnerships. In a speech given to the Women Writers Suffrage League in 1910, the American playwright and actress Elizabeth Robins argued that it was important for girls to be able to read fiction about 'significant lives lived by women', urging her fellow writers to write about all the various positions of women in the twentieth century, not just those of 'sweethearts and wives' but also those of 'other things besides: leaders, discoverers, militants'.[44] Castle's paradigms of lesbian