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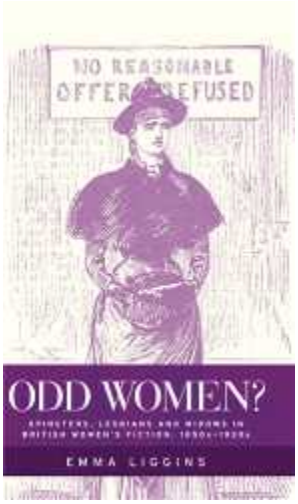

Independent Women

Odd Women? Spinsters, Lesbians and Widows in British Women's Fiction, 1850s-1930s. Emma Liggins. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014. 288 pp.

Reviewed by Sarah Parker, Loughborough University

<1>In 1862, Frances Power Cobbe famously asked: 'What shall we Do with our Old Maids?' Questions regarding the so-called odd or surplus woman reverberated throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and continued to rage during the twentieth century, imbued with added pertinence due to the catastrophic loss of men during World War One. Whether she was worried over, advised and admonished, celebrated as a 'woman of the future' or demonised as a predatory lesbian or bitter spinster, the contentious figure of the independent woman appears repeatedly throughout fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, often functioning as a potent embodiment of the fears and desires of her own particular day.

<2>In this impressively rich and diverse study, Emma Liggins traces the developing permutations of this single woman — or rather 'woman outside of heterosexual marriage' (1) — in women's fiction, journalism and life writing. One of the many original aspects of this study is Liggins's focus not simply on single women, but on widows (and 'imaginary widows' — women who feel prematurely robbed of marital prospects due to the death of potential husbands, a concept developed by Katherine Holden),(1) mistresses, maiden aunts and 'home daughters', lesbians, suffragettes and unmarried mothers. By drawing connections and highlighting important differences between these various groups, Liggins complicates the concept of the 'odd' woman, building up a complex palimpsest that reveals how this figure shifts and changes across an eighty year period — and not necessarily always in the ways we might expect.

<3>Following a useful introduction that comprehensively situates the contexts and key debates surrounding the odd woman, Chapter One concentrates on the mid-Victorian spinster heroine as the precursor to the independent woman of fin-de-siècle fiction. Liggins addresses the issues involved in writing the lives of professional women, analysing Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) and autobiographical writings by Harriet Martineau, Frances Power Cobbe and Margaret Oliphant. Whilst the section on Gaskell is rather brief, arguing that she portrays Brontë as a 'dutiful daughter' and wife (37), the subsequent sections expand on visions of the creative woman's isolation, considering how Power Cobbe's 1894 autobiography carefully negotiates the topic of female marriages (in this case, her relationship with Mary Lloyd) and how Oliphant portrays her experience of widowhood, bereavement and loneliness, constructing a personal narrative of sheer endurance rather than simple professional success.

<4>The chapter concludes with readings of the spinster heroine in Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853) and Brontë's *Villette* (1853). Though interesting in relation to concepts of imaginary widowhood and homosociality, this analysis feels slightly limited, particularly for novels of such complexity and significance. However, the readings of anti-feminist Charlotte M. Yonge's *Hopes and Fears* (1860) and *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865) anticipate the potential Liggins will discover in later middlebrow women's fiction — although Yonge has a habit of eventually marrying off her spinster heroines in a capitulation to the norms of the marriage plot.

<5>Chapter Two takes us into the realms of the New Woman, a new manifestation of the spinster as modern 'bachelor girl' with her own flat, earning an independent living. Liggins discusses New Woman novels such as Ella Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), but the chapter becomes most engaging when Liggins turns to Netta Syrett's fiction alongside her autobiography *The Sheltering Tree* (1939), in which Syrett endeavors to defuse the potentially scandalous Bohemianism and promiscuity associated with the independent woman. This discussion of the twin evils of celibacy and promiscuity, both negatively associated with the bachelor girl, leads intriguingly to the role of mistress in the 1926 autobiography of Violet Hunt which recounts her 'Flurried Years' (to borrow from Hunt's title) as Ford Madox Ford's mistress. The chapter concludes with a discussion of adoption in the work of Annie Holdsworth and Evelyn Sharp — a fascinating topic that is left a little underdeveloped here, but opens up possibilities for future studies of the single woman and concepts of non-biological motherhood.

<6>Chapters Three and Four move into the 1910s and 1920s. Although this period may be associated with the liberated flapper and 'bright young things', Liggins draws attention to the enduring presence of the 'home daughter' in fiction by May Sinclair and F. M. Mayor, in which she is usually portrayed as an unmarried daughter trapped in the domestic space, caring for elderly relations, and associated with an outdated Victorianism. It is perhaps surprising that middlebrow fiction by women often offers the most empowering alternatives for this stagnant figure. For example, in E. H. Young's *Miss Mole* (1930), the eponymous spinster is a lively, imaginative figure who is described by Liggins as 'an actress, as a magician, as a player of games' (147). And in Lettice Cooper's *The New House* (1936), the home daughter finally manages to escape from her possessive mother's clutches. Liggins is consistently astute on such complex generational dynamics, retaining a focus on the relations between old and new generations of women throughout her study.

<7>In the next chapter, Liggins turns her focus to lesbianism. After an eye-opening section on advice guides for women regarding female intimacy and friendship, some of which are surprisingly progressive (for example, Laura Hutton in 1935 regards lesbianism as 'a problem to be worked out with care… not necessarily something to be eradicated'),(2) Liggins discusses fiction by Radclyffe Hall, Rosamund Lehmann and Clemence Dane, the latter of whom plays on fears regarding predatory lesbian schoolmistresses in the post-Freudian novel *Regiment of Women* (1917). Liggins places such novels alongside the love letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland, and Radclyffe Hall and Evguenia Souline, arguing that such private correspondence reveals an open celebration of lesbian desire that was not possible in fiction of the period. This may be true, but it strikes me as odd that more outspoken and experimental novels such as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and Townsend Warner's *Summer Will Show* (1936) do not receive more treatment here, particularly given Liggins's interest in the post-marital and the potentialities of fantastic fictional modes. Additionally, an expanded discussion of the role of Puddle in *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) might well have developed Liggins's arguments regarding the parallels between the lesbian and the spinster.

<8>The final chapter addresses the post-war context of novels and autobiographies by Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby and Woolf. Liggins is careful to avoid tracing an unhalting progression towards women's increased independence. Her nuanced discussion of Holtby's *South Riding* (1934) and Woolf's *The Years* (1937) highlights the ambivalent sexuality of a heroine like Sarah Burton, still caught in a balancing act between celibacy and the risks of promiscuity, and foregrounds the generational pessimism and enduring tensions between women in Woolf's *The Years*. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the post-marital woman in Vita Sackville-West's *Family History* (1932) and *All Passion Spent* (1931), the latter offering a more hopeful connection between the elderly widow and her great-granddaughter, suggesting the greater potential for self-determination for women of the future.

<9>Overall, *Odd Women* is an incredibly diverse study that addresses a striking range of texts and authors across a broad historical period. The historical sweep is perhaps a little too wide, as some longer novels are dealt with a little too briefly, at least in the case of earlier texts such as *Villette*. Liggins has a tendency to move quite rapidly from one author to another, meaning that some of the analysis lacks depth. However this is merely a side-effect of holding together such an ambitious and wide-ranging project. Ultimately the book's strengths lie in its uniting of several different kinds of 'odd' women,

lending complexity to the associations and meanings of this figure, and in its consistent comparison of fictional and non-fictional portrayals of spinsterhood, meaning that the nuances of context are never lost. A final element of strength here is the inclusion of middlebrow authors and commentators in addition to modernist writers, revealing that some of the most innovative portrayals of the spinster could be found in popular, middlebrow texts. This one of the many enlightening and original insights offered by this book which will prove compulsory reading to researchers interested in nineteenth and twentieth-century literature, women's history, life writing and conceptions of the family.

Endnotes

(1)Katherine Holden, 'Imaginary Widows: Spinsters, Marriage, and the "Lost Generation" in Britain after the Great War,' *Journal of Family History* 30.4 (2005), 388-409.(^)

(2)Laura Hutton, *The Single Woman and her Emotional Problems* (London: Balliere, Tindall and Cox, 1935, 1946), 103-4.(^)