

What If the New Woman is a Scholar-Athlete Too?

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<1> An Oxbridge preparatory school, Hurst Manor—the setting of Mrs. George de Horne Vaizey’s (Jessie Mansergh’s) *Tom And Some Other Girls* (1901)—is populated by female students who, after mandatory afternoon games, consistently “returned to the house glowing and panting, and surged up the stairs—a stream of buoyant young life” (162). This school embodies the “healthy body, healthy mind” philosophy, and Tom (Thomasina) Bolderston, who eventually becomes a Newnham College student, typifies the scholar-athlete of my title.

<2> The novel introduces Tom as “a square, stolid-looking creature, square-faced, square-shouldered, with square toes to her boots, and elbows thrust out on each side in a square, aggressive fashion” (27). She embodies the awkward and unattractive New Woman so often seen in the periodical press. That Tom “had other ideas than matrimony for her own future” and believes that she and a past mentor at Hurst Manor “could be very happy together . . . and grow into two nice contented old maids” positions her outside the heteronormative world (151, 195). Tom’s business plan also edges her towards a homosocial world. She pledges to “give up [her] life for [girls’] service,” intending to open her own school and thus shows herself to be a New Woman eager for remunerative and rewarding employment (152).

<3> Tom solidifies her link with the scholar-athlete of my title and the argument of this article in a scene in which she describes having tea at an aunt’s home. She reports that

Every spinster in the neighbourhood is coming to . . . deliver her views on higher education. Such a lark! Some of them approve, and others object, and I agree with each in turn, until the poor dears are so bamboozled they don’t know what to do. (193)

Tom delights in inspiring such bamboozle-ment, and the argument of this article is that the university-focused New Woman fiction I explore does something very similar.⁽¹⁾ This fiction offers ambiguous endings for its scholar-athletes, and these endings have a purpose: urging readers to define for themselves the social changes necessary in turn-of-the-century Britain for intellectually and physically active women to thrive.⁽²⁾ The fiction’s conclusions challenge readers to envision what their ideal modern world would be.

<4> As rich and varied as New Woman fiction scholarship is, little attention has been focused on British fiction that is set in universities or that showcases university-educated characters. I have found none that examines a character specifically for the merger of her athletic achievement and university education.⁽³⁾ Sally Mitchell’s *The New Girl: Girls’ Culture in England 1880-1915* (1995), especially its chapter “College, and a Hero” is an exception to the dearth of scholarship on university-focused women’s fiction. Mitchell’s work not only introduces much lost or forgotten university-focused fiction

into critical discussion, it puts forward a still widely accepted claim. It argues that a protagonist in such fiction “prove[d] her mettle within a sheltered setting that provided independence, friendship, and the safe excitement of pioneering an admirable new role. . . . [This character] gave [readers] mental space to think of themselves in new ways” (*New Girl* 73). Mitchell further stresses that the fictional university is a safe space that “reassure[d] both girls and their parents that the role was appropriately feminine” and contrasts this fiction with “[t]he ‘forward’ and ‘advanced’ novels about new women and modern women [which] were problem novels” (*New Girl* 73). Mitchell’s work fits with much convincing New Woman criticism that reads the fiction as offering female readers fleeting visions of what they could be and powerful reminders of what they must do to be considered “appropriate.”

<5> Anna Bogen’s *Women’s University Fiction, 1880-1945* (2014) offers another rare scholarly examination of female university focused fiction. Another recovery work—her critical text was published alongside the first (of two) four volume sets of *Women’s University Narratives, 1890-1945* that include long-out-of-publication novels which Bogen has edited—Bogen’s text approaches the fiction narratologically, reading them as failed or dissonant examples of the *Bildungsroman* genre. She concludes,

that the female university novel is indeed distinct from its male cousins, but this distinction lies in its radical *content*, in particular the representation of the injustices that faced women students, not in any supposedly progressive departures from the *Bildungsroman* form. Indeed, the jar between an apparently conservative narrative arc and a contrasting content merely serves to throw into relief the exclusion that women students felt from established centres of power. (167; Bogen’s emphasis)

Bogen’s emphasis on “injustice,” while partially indicative of the fact that she looks at later and more controversy-engaged examples of college fiction than Mitchell, continues the critical consensus that presents this fiction as a vehicle of social critique yet not a catalyst of social change. This critical consensus also positions this fiction and its readers as focused on present day issues rather than future possibilities.

<6> Logically, powerful social advocacy is not typically linked with New Woman fiction. Often its strongest characters end, at best, in conventional ways, typically a marriage that does not promise personal growth. Gillian Sutherland’s *In Search of the New Woman: Middle-Class Women and Work in Britain 1870-1914* (2015) illustrates that social change was not an actual reality either. Sutherland’s book shows that the real New Woman was not making significant social or economic strides nor gaining personal independence. Sutherland, however, refuses to dismiss New Woman fiction as mere wishful thinking or unworthy of scholarly investigation. Instead she embraces

Clare Pettitt’s tentative suggestion that one should explore whether the “imaginary New Woman did help people . . . to imagine the possibility [of complex social changes which led to a redefinition of gender roles and a consolidation of the notion of women’s rights at the turn of the century], and then to recognize the emergence of the real thing.” (162)(4)

Sutherland argues that this fiction, if compared and contrasted to a reader’s personal experience and knowledge of other women’s lives, could give that reader a critical lens through which to evaluate those experiences and guide her choices.

<7> I follow Sutherland and Pettitt in thinking that New Woman fiction could catalyze readers' ideas about what is possible for women. I also supplement that belief with the claims forwarded by Kate Flint and Lyn Pykett: that New Woman fiction cultivates an audience of active, critical readers.

<8> Flint counters the assertion of many nineteenth-century reviewers that New Woman readers would identify—dangerously—with this fiction's protagonists, an act that would lead to emotional excess, even “mental disease” and that suggested a visceral rather than cerebral engagement with the fiction (298). Noting the frequent use of familiar literary allusions and the “downbeat endings . . . [that] ensure that the reader is not lured into total identification with the central character,” Flint argues that the novels “encourage an interrogative manner of reading” and that such interrogation would turn to self and social evaluation (297, 296). Flint asserts the novels create a “space” for readers in which they are “alerted to the simultaneous operation of both unconscious and societal factors upon an individual”; in such a space, “the readers' own critical examination of their own position within society” could also occur (297). Flint describes New Woman fiction readers as critics of themselves and their society, or more particularly, themselves as shaped by society.

<9> Pykett similarly claims that New Woman fiction encouraged readers to assume a critical stance in respect to society and points out that this fiction used melodramatic means to inspire such awareness. She reads this fiction as portraying the “‘impossibility’ of women's situations” and presenting women's lives as “inherently problematic, and unhapp[y]” (148). Pykett asserts that these fraught descriptions become “challenges,” explaining that, “New Woman writers sometimes adopted a proto-modernist form, using a *proliferation* of voices and perspectives to challenge fixed views” (195; my emphasis). I emphasize “proliferation” as it suggests that active readers of New Woman fiction were shown a range of potential changes to their worlds. The ambiguous endings of the fiction I consider make such a range of possibilities available.(5)

<10> The critical views just presented—that hold out hope for the “cultural importance” and “ideological complexity” of this fiction (Bittel para. 32)—allow perfect entry into New Woman fiction that includes a scholar-athlete. Beyond garnering the active reader Flint and Pykett describe, this strain of New Woman fiction could have won readers who valued and/or had some advanced education and thus would have been curious, critical, perhaps even socially progressive. Those readers who also shared an athletic interest—spanning self-defined sportswomen to readers of women's periodicals who would have seen frequent articles and ads about women's increasing participation in sports—would have also been familiar with claims that intertwined physical and mental strength with social agency and responsibility.

<11> The healthy body, healthy mind philosophy became more frequently and specifically articulated and expanded upon in the 1880s and 1890s when physical education in girls schools became increasingly common. Arguing for the value of such education, Frances Elizabeth Hoggan's *On the Physical Education of Girls*, for example, confidently asserted that “the size and quality of the brain is largely influenced by the muscular development of the body” (28). Gymnastics instruction, in particular, became a vehicle for such muscular development. Beyond its knowledge-advancing capacities (specifically of anatomy, physiology, etc.), gymnastics' ability to “confer courage and presence of mind” was frequently claimed (*Whole Art* 6). These qualities had social implications; *The Whole Art of Gymnastics and Muscular Development* explains that gymnastic exercises “are also calculated to inspire him [the gymnast] with confidence in a moment of danger, and to enable him to extricate himself, *as well as others*, from peril” (6; my emphasis).

<12> Martina Bergman-Österberg, the woman who entrenched gymnastics in British schools' curriculum, explained such physical education's value in gendered and progressive terms.⁽⁶⁾ She asserted that "the emancipation of her sex lay in the securing of economic independence, and that such independence could be derived only from efficient work. It was to form the foundation for this kind of contribution that she sought a healthy physique" (May 39). Rhoda Anstey, Österberg's most influential student, trained her gymnastic students to strive for similar goals. As reported by Mrs. Sumsion, an Anstey student of 1911, a widely shared belief of Anstey's students was that "girls ought to be independent, have a life of their own, and not depend on marriage as a means of support"; Sumsion added that "[m]ost of the girls who came to College . . . were filled with the highest ideals to do some good to the Community" (qtd. in Crunden 4). Thus, concurrent with the popularity of New Woman fiction, there existed a growing population asserting that physically and mentally strong women could claim social power.⁽⁷⁾ Such a climate could logically create a readership willing to accept and be inspired by a New Woman scholar-athlete, and I claim Edith Nesbit, George Paston (Emily Morse Symonds), and Alice Stronach wrote for those readers.

<13> To substantiate my claim, I turn to readings of Nesbit's "The Girton Girl" (1895), Paston's *The Career of Candida* (1896), and Stronach's *A Newnham Friendship* (1901). These texts pinpoint three social changes that this fiction might have suggested to its readers: the need 1) to eschew binary thinking, specifically about male and female capabilities; 2) to rethink the feminine caregiver role that umbrellas wife, mother, nurse, and teacher; and 3) to demand that women actively shape their marriages. While all of the works I discuss speak to each of these ideas, for clarity, I will show the exploration of each social issue in a single text.

<14> Nesbit's "The Girton Girl" seems a lighthearted story of college girl who abandons her "too rigid" ideas for love. The abruptness of its conclusion, however, could suggest that refusing a rigid separation of the male and female spheres is its real goal. This short story foregrounds Laura Wentworth, whose intelligence is immediately and repeatedly established. Her initial description "handsome and learned" is quickly elaborated upon with "she had achieved what her friends called 'something wonderful' at Girton" and, more specifically, that "she could construe one of the hardest bits of Æschylus . . . with equal grace and readiness" (755). It's further noted that "[s]he had strong views on . . . Women's Rights," specifically on marriage. Laura's learning imbues her with a seriousness that contrasts her with Lavinia, the friend with whom she summers at Elmering. Laura reads and savors this quiet seaside environment that Lavinia finds dull, that is, until Charles Peke visits. While Laura views Charles's visits as a "bother," she politely entertains him (756). During one of his visits, a discussion of a mutual acquaintance's marriage leads Laura to air her strongest held views: that marriage is "degrading slavery" and that the majority of the population refuses to think it "possible for a woman to prefer some other profession to marriage" (757, 755).

<15> The story describes Laura's athleticism with similar repetition and specificity. Early paragraphs assure readers that "she was no mere book-worm, but a *healthy* young girl, with all a *natural* girl's tastes"; "healthy" and "natural" were often used to suggest female athleticism (755; my emphasis). Without inspiring the narrator's approbation, Laura's athleticism soon exceeds the typically "appropriate" norm. Besides riding, tennis-playing, rowing, and shooting—"she could pull an oar or a trigger with strength and accuracy" and wields a most precise throwing arm (she successfully aims pebbles "at an oyster-shell")—she displays "magnificent" swimming power (755, 757, 758). Indeed, her swimming leads to a miraculous rescue. During a high tide, she saves Charles who is drowning after breaking a leg far from shore.

<16> While the story twice hints at Laura's fondness for Charles before he undertakes his fateful swim and all but makes her love of him undeniable the moment before she dives into the sea, the twenty-one-paragraph description of the rescue foregrounds only Laura's thoughts about how to execute this rescue, a focus that often explicitly contrasts Laura's strength with Charles's weakness. Laura "change[s] her stroke frequently" thus "saving her strength" (758). "[C]ut[ting] through the deep water like a blue water-snake," she reads the waves, changing from "breast-stroke" to "side-stroke" as required (758). Finding Charles with a broken leg, she dismisses his explanation of the accident, directing him to "lie still. I'll manage" (759). Then attaching herself with her swimsuit sash to Charles—who is "ghastly white," bloody because of the "gaping wound" on the foot of his broken leg, and who faints during the rescue—Laura "husband[s] her strength" and "swam slowly towards the shore" (758-59). Charles's dialogue during the rescue is surprisingly emasculating; it is heavy with terms of endearment and dramatic attempts at self-sacrifice. He pleads with her: "[l]eave me, save yourself—oh, my darling, you must" (759). And, after recovering from his fainting spell and recognizing Laura's great exertion as she continues to pull him towards shore, he says "Never mind, we'll die together—my darling" (759). The story's next line, its final description of the rescue, is "And still she swam on" (759).

<17> The story's seven-paragraph conclusion follows immediately upon this dramatic rescue and is rife with equally dramatic reversals. The reversals occur during a celebration that marks one-year passing since Laura saved Charles. It is also the day of their marriage.⁽⁸⁾ The couple is honeymooning at Elmering, and the villagers have come to celebrate as well. The villagers' celebration, however, focuses more on Laura's strength than the recent marriage:

Outside the crowd cheered hoarsely, again and again, and when the two stood in the porch . . . twenty hands were thrust forward to touch Laura's.

"Touch there, my lad," said a bearded father to his little one: "that's the hand of the bravest woman I ever see [sic]. We're proud, ma'am—I tell you—that you've come to us as knows what you're worth, to spend your honeymoon." (759)

Laura quickly refocuses the celebration on her love: "turning brave eyes on the fisher-folk through blinding tears[, she said,] 'It was not brave; it was selfish—because I loved him—and Love is the power that moves the world'" (759). While the story itself terms her eyes brave, Laura's words reverse that description. Laura also reverses her description of love. When now asserting love's power to move the world, Laura adopts Charles's exact words about love to which Laura had earlier responded by terming love "folly" (757). In the same discussion, Laura had judged marriage an institution in which "stupid people" engage (757).

<18> The story's final description of Charles introduces further reversals. Charles is never named in these concluding paragraphs, but rather referred to as "a man" with Laura and as "her husband" (759). Instead of erasing his identity, I read these word choices as reinstating Charles's masculinity and re-appropriating the word "husband" from Laura with whom it is linked during the rescue. So too does "husband" underscore the fact that she is now a wife. This conclusion also focuses on Charles's body. It describes him as "a dark, pale, handsome, man"; further fleshing out the description, it is noted that he "limped a very little as he walked" (759). While "pale" and "limp[ing]," Charles still takes charge. In the story's final paragraph, he "drew her back into the house" (759). This move reverses her act of pulling his broken body through the water to safety, potentially suggesting that Charles now controls her.

<19> These reversals introduce binary conceptions of male-female relationships and power structures: "love is slavery" becomes "love moves the world," and female physical dominance gives way to male

physical domination. These reversals are also overly dramatic and overly sudden. The conclusion marks an overturning of Laura's thoughts and personality. It makes it unclear whether she will continue to promote women's rights to which she appeared strongly committed paragraphs earlier. Readers do not know whether she will continue to pursue any physical activities, another seemingly essential element of her character. And her "blinding tears" mark an emotional excess that significantly departs from the initial rational and self-possessed description of her, one in which she perhaps presciently asserts that love "makes people blind" (759, 757). This conclusion thus focuses active, critical readers' attention on the unexplained, sudden nature of these radical and not obviously necessary changes. Such focus could lead the readers to reject such binary thinking, to conclude that an "about-face" in one's actions or ideals does not have to occur for an intelligent, active woman to fit into society and, consequently, to fight for compromises that benefit all.

<20> Recognizing and working against the limitations of society began early for Candida St. John, the title character of Paston's *The Career of Candida*. Such awareness arose because she was educated by her father who felt that by bringing a "girl-child into the world" he and his wife had already "done her irreparable injury" (5). He attempted to rectify that damage by "let[ting] her be a boy as long as possible" (5). Her father carried out that plan by allowing her to "climb trees and ride the pony astride" and by giving her a "liberal education" that included Latin, English, mathematics, and Greek (5). Her physical and intellectual education continued through the help of the boy next door, another scholar-athlete, who instructed her in tennis, shooting, and cricket when he was not discussing books and philosophy with her. Her physical education is successful; in her youth, she has better biceps than any other girl. Mentally she keeps up as well and was bright enough to go to Girton. That plan was abandoned only when she learned of the Bloomsbury Gymnasium for Women where she could pursue intellectually and physically demanding studies and ultimately become a gymnastics instructor, in other words, a professional, independent woman.

<21> At Bloomsbury, Candida's successes—both mental and physical—continue. Candida's desire to grow mentally is self-motivated: "In her spare time she greedily devoured books on any and every subject—history, science, philosophy; . . . and it was probably chiefly due to the excellences of her physical condition that she escaped a bad attack of mental indigestion" (24-25). Correspondingly, her athletic prowess gains her "considerable distinction" (25). Later when teaching, she is known for having the "best figure in London" and for physically restraining a man who is beating a horse (59). Teaching is particularly rewarding for her, for she sees the usefulness of her work: "Nothing gave her more gratification than to see the girls who came to the gymnasium in the giggling, hysterical, anæmic stage transformed under her eyes into strong healthy women" (73). Teaching also breeds in her an awareness of many who are suffering, specifically the "'Women sobbing out of sight / Because men made the laws'" (80). She dedicates herself to their cause, declaring she won't die before "having broken a lance on behalf of my sisters who are made victims and scapegoats of society" (80). She emerges as a disciple of the teachings and political climate current in real gymnastic teaching institutions like Österberg's and Anstey's.

<22> And then she meets the man she will marry. Upon meeting him, she recognizes his lack of physical strength. Consequently, their first dates entail Candida teaching Adrian exercises to foster muscle growth. Like their budding romance, the exercises are successful, enough so that, after a temporary breakup, one of Candida's first reactions when seeing him again is to note that he has lost some of the muscle mass they had worked so diligently for him to gain.

<23> Not surprisingly, Candida and Adrian's marriage is unsuccessful. Adrian dangerously and disastrously invests their money and loses it. He cheats on her with her best friend. He even makes himself so distant that Candida and others accuse him of having no affection for or interest in his own son. After their money is lost and Adrian adds drinking to his destructive tendencies, Candida leaves him, taking their son with her. Because she must support herself and her son, she returns to teaching, a return that makes her feel released from "bondage" and once again "buoyant" (231). At this point, it seems like a foreboding statement made by her father—that a "masculine education doesn't hinder a woman from making a fool of herself" (135)—has been acted out and now the successful portion of Candida's life may dawn. Other episodes get readers' hopes up too. The novel repeatedly stresses that Candida has not lost her physical strength. When she returns to teaching gymnastics, it takes her a mere month to regain the physical strength and agility she had when first teaching. And that strength doesn't ebb. Instead, in the novel's conclusion, she is described as still young and physically vigorous immediately after she has worked to restore the marriage of her best friend (with whom her husband cheated) and the man she should have married (280).⁽⁹⁾

<24> The novel's final chapter also stresses that Candida's fight against humanity's suffering hasn't dissipated and that she has the energy to become increasingly active, especially as her son will soon be attending school. The narrator, in fact, suggests Candida would willingly take on great challenges, declaring "it was not enough for [Candida] to love and serve those who loved her and were loveable . . . she longed to gather the whole suffering of humanity into her arms, and hush its cries upon her breast" (280-81). The description of this desire grows increasingly dramatic and ends with an unsettling hint of her potential for self-sabotage: "woman is by nature a fighting animal as long as she knows herself to be on the weaker side, with long odds against her" (281). Readers hope that the "long odds" are simply those created by many years of a male-dominated society. Those long odds, however, return in the form of her dissolute husband. When they meet unexpectedly in a park, Adrian is paralyzed; his prognosis: he will be a "helpless invalid, for ten, twenty, maybe thirty years" and his "brain will probably be affected" (286). The novel ends with Candida not only rejecting his offer of a divorce, but also giving up her "youth and beauty at the shrine of a disabled husband" (288). The final words of *The Career of Candida* describe her "eyes shining because the future lay dim before her, her steps buoyant because the yoke was upon her neck, her mind at ease because she had just assumed a grave responsibility, and her heart satisfied because she had flung all hopes of happiness away" (289).

<25> Abounding in reversals as did Nesbit's story, Paston's conclusion is littered with almost histrionic descriptions of Candida that differ from other sections of the novel.⁽¹⁰⁾ The repetitive final clauses, in truth, verge on the comic. While such exaggeration seems composed to spur readers' rejection of Candida's choice, Candida's relationship to her now-invalid husband is also designed in a way that could move readers beyond mere rejection of that choice to thoughts about what could be possible for Candida.

<26> Paston's novel is atypical in the way it joins a physically enabled woman and disabled man. For example, Adrian does not fit the role of "the begging imposter," the most typical role of adult disabled males in Victorian fiction according to Martha Stoddard Holmes (95). That is not to say that Adrian couldn't be considered a beggar and cheat who "represent[s] the excess of bilked emotion, imposture, and inauthenticity" (Holmes 95); I simply stress that neither Candida nor others are fooled into caring for him. From the beginning of their relationship, Candida recognizes Adrian's physical, intellectual, and emotional weaknesses. Adrian also fails to occupy a Rochester-like role, that is, the man who is debilitated to facilitate a companionate or democratic marriage. If anything Candida would be the candidate for tempering. Nor does he inspire reader sympathy because of his affliction, use the

boredom borne of that affliction to catalyze the plot, and/or eventually temper his use of his illness to indulge his whims—a trajectory for the disabled Victorian male described by Karen Bourrier, reading Charlotte Yonge’s most famous exploration of male disability: *The Heir of Redclyffe* (117).

<27> Candida does not fit the generic expectations typically connected to the feminine caregiver either. Though almost lost amid the histrionic descriptions, it is noted that Candida may keep her job and thus would not act as Adrian’s primary nurse. She mentions—through her tears and other dramatic proclamations—that she plans to put him in her “spare-room” that she can afford because she has “saved money” that will also enable her to “get a properly trained servant to attend upon” him (287). Candida will be with Adrian “in the evening,” when his son will also entertain him (287). Countering another stock plot, Candida does not enter a relationship in which Adrian stands as either “a manageable object for the heroine’s affections” or “an alternate persona, who provides the daydreamer with a gender role in which more interesting adventures are possible”—relationships that Sally Mitchell describes as typical of mid-century sentimental fiction that many contemporary readers still read as defining appropriate female roles (“Sentiment” 38).

<28> So in contrast to typical Victorian fiction, Paston’s novel uses this athletic intellectual woman to urge readers to redefine what a female caregiver could be and to see that a woman could inhabit that role while acting in the domestic and professional spheres simultaneously. The novel forwards that possibility not by hinting that Candida’s life with Adrian—even if she continues working—will be ideal. It suggests that even in this world in which a bad marriage is seen as better than a broken one, there remain glimmers of hope for this woman’s physical and intellectual freedom. In turn, this novel’s readers could conclude that it is then reasonable to fight for the expansion of women’s rights, especially in terms of employment and familial responsibilities.

<29> How marriage could be shaped by women to foster rather than frustrate their goals becomes the question for the active readers of Stronach’s *A Newnham Friendship*. Stronach’s Carol Martin embodies this question. Like the protagonists discussed before her, she enters the novel with grace and strength. Her initial description shows her returning to Newnham at Michaelmas term, a “tall girl in a simple travelling dress” who immediately uses her “firm wrists and strong fingers” to help her friend open a can of milk (14). Carol’s strength surpasses this small feat. She is an able equestrian, preferring the power of a horse over a bicycle, a vigorous tennis and hockey player, and an accomplished walker; she is even compared to “Atalanta or . . . some fleet-footed creature of the forest” (15). She is also physically able to help during a serious hockey accident. Her strong arms come to the rescue then, and later Carol’s powerful grip is noted, reminding readers of her continued strength.

<30> Carol’s academic prowess equals her physical power. Besides earning a “first division, first class”—a feat only matched by a male Cambridge student—Carol displays remarkable debating skills, in large part, because, after her first debate, she “devoted herself to political economy and logic” (200, 49). Her work is successful, so much so that she has the intellect and confidence to speak out at a male debate, an act that inspires “a moment of dead silence. A woman had spoken in public, and a Cambridge audience required time to recover its breath” (145). The male speaker’s inability to answer her question, another man’s attempt to undermine Carol’s argument, and whispers in the crowd supporting Carol lead her to define her life’s goal: ““To learn to speak in public. There are truths that want saying—and—I mean to say some of them some day”” (146). This desire meshes with her vision of education as a privilege that gives one purpose. She likens the Newnham students’ studies to military drills—“we must be drilled and disciplined for the fight, we must learn to use our swords”—that prepare them for their “life’s work [and] increases [their] responsibility” (103). This belief makes her an advocate for women’s

access to higher education and takes her into the London settlements for the poor. There she has a “three days’ engagement in the High School. . . . The other half of the time she gives to her public work” (236). Speaking dominates that public work and earns her the title of “best woman speaker of our day,” a title won for her “sincerity, her passionate, intense love of the people, [and] her readiness in answering questions” (236-37). She finds fulfilling, important work and succeeds at it.

<31> As with the other texts, a man complicates this plot. This time, however, the man grows in a way that suggests his capacity for valuing and perhaps fostering Carol’s physical and intellectual skills. Admittedly, Ted Carew’s entry into the novel is inauspicious. He’s the apparent co-conspirator of Ralph Lynn, a known gambler who has helped lead Carol’s brother into debt and destitution. Though at their first meeting Ted offers to help Carol search for her brother, he offers that help with one foot in a cab. It’s later revealed that Ted is a childhood friend of one of Carol’s fellow students, Olive, who vouches for his good nature. That good nature is displayed when he visits Olive and lends significant help when she is injured. It is further suggested on a later visit when he speaks intelligently and frankly with Carol. Ted dashes the good will readers may have afforded him, however, when he enlists Olive to ask Carol to marry him. Carol’s definitive rejection of this proposal is underlined by her assertion that if she ever did marry she “should want to mate with a *man*, not a boy” (120; Stronach’s emphasis). This rejection inspires Ted to set off for Africa where he proves himself conscious of the delicate political situation, brave as a protector of his fellow settlers, and willing to undertake “good tough work” (243).

<32> Even more indicative of Ted’s potential to be an emotionally and intellectually able companion for Carol is his marginalia in Carol’s copy of *The Imitation of Christ*. Ted’s notes show his interest in passages about “patience, fortitude in trouble, comfort in desolation” and focus on the “chapter on ‘Deadness to Earthly Affections’” (279). Not only is Ted’s apparent work at self improvement matched by Carol’s own, which focused on rejecting “the snares of love and power, desire for praise, for the esteem of one’s fellow-men,” the narrator suggests Ted’s and Carol’s engagement with this notated copy leads to increased sympathy with and admiration for each other (279). The novel appears to be staging a relationship in which each partner might participate in the growth of the relationship, themselves, and each other. Ted’s letter announcing his intention to (re)propose could also support such an optimistic reading, for in it he stresses that he supports her work but simply asks her to compromise, undertaking “work in the country instead of work in the town” (287). He even justifies the compromise by stressing that the country population also needs “women like” Carol who have the “power to help” (287).

<33> The novel, however, undermines readers’ confidence in this potentially mutually fulfilling marriage. Beyond making clear that Ted’s growth has been achieved through colonial exploits and not by social reform like Carol’s, the novel explicitly reminds readers that Ted took Carol’s book without permission and reads her markings that “had been intended for no eyes but her own” (278). More unsettling is the fact that Ted’s reentry into Carol’s life, this time as a viable marriage partner, silences her. As soon as the women learn of Ted’s work in Africa, Carol begins to separate herself from others and retreats into silence. The narrator marks the radical nature of this change: Carol “had grown strangely quiet and reticent, and unlike the frank, joyous creature who had taken the shy Eppie under her wing” (277). Notably Carol forces herself to break her silence to discuss with Eppie whether work alone could fulfill her. Amplifying suggestions made consistently by many of Carol’s friends, Eppie fervently argues that marriage and children are “the highest happiness that life can give a woman” (285). Carol speaks no more after this discussion. Ted’s letter that announces that he is returning to personally ask her to marry him directly follows. Eppie’s prediction that Carol is learning that “a woman’s destiny holds love as well as work [and that] ‘we had far better leave behind us work unfinished than life itself incomplete’” closes the novel (288).

<34> By refusing to confirm the prediction of Carol's marriage or to break Carol's silence, Stronach's novel follows in the tradition of the other texts. It ends ambiguously and frustratingly inconsistent with Carol's character. This ending thus again could engage those active, critical readers. While it sets before them a more fully fleshed out vision of a marriage that could serve both partners than does either Nesbit's or Paston's work, it never lets readers forget that women must have active voices in those marriages, voices that need not only to join one's eventual partner, but also to critically engage with the ill-advised or overly enthusiastic support of marriage offered by friends, family, and society at large.

<35> At the same time as they entered fiction, female scholar-athletes made their way into popular periodicals. Sometimes they did so in surprisingly complimentary ways. For example, the March 8th, 1884 issue of *Punch* published the poem "Girl Gymnasts" by Frances Hoggan, the first British woman to receive a doctorate in medicine from an European university. Repeatedly the poem promotes a regimen of intertwined intellectual and athletic pursuits. It includes lines such as "Let the ladies learn gymnastics, if they please, as well as men, / Alternating feats athletic with the pencil and the pen" and "We should educate the muscles as we ever try to train, / By severe examinations, many a weary little brain" (1-2, 9-10). Whereas the poem's opening line hints at some equality with men, its final lines make women dominant; those lines assert that "Having taken boxing lessons, ill-used wives will turn like worms, / While the brutal British husband pusillanimously 'squirms'" (15-16). A similar upending of the typical male-female power dynamic arises in the famous July 6th, 1910 *Punch* cartoon entitled "The Suffragette that Knew Jiu-Jitsu." The cartoon shows a diminutive woman in a confident jiu-jitsu fighting stance. She is literally half the size of the policeman drawn directly across from her, and she is facing off against over ten noticeably fearful policemen, four of whom have jumped the fence behind her (Mills 9). While the tongue-in-cheek nature of these representations cannot be ignored, the poem and cartoon offer problematic portraits of these women, for they suggest that women want to overturn current power structures.

<36> I introduce these cartoons to underscore the more nuanced suggestions offered by Nesbit's, Paston's, and Stronach's fiction. This fiction presents flawed yet multi-talented female characters. The fiction affords these characters enough success to display their strengths and enough failure to raise questions about whether these characters and/or the world they inhabit cause the failures. "The Girton Girl," *The Career of Candida*, and *A Newnham Friendship* then demand (if not work to create) active, imaginative readers able to envision what a modern world that afforded athletic intellectual women acceptance and agency might look like.

<37> The July 24th, 1875 *Punch* cartoon entitled "A Discussion of Women's Rights" offers a visual representation of the type of reader who could see such possibilities. The illustration shows a bespectacled, slight man standing beside a woman who not only has broader shoulders, better posture, and more developed arms than him, but also stands a half a head higher than him. A key portion of the cartoon's caption explains that he "admits that women occasionally rival men in intellect and character, but contends that their inferiority in strength and stature will be an insuperable bar to their ever being placed on a footing of equality with the sterner sex" (25). The woman's response is "she says nothing, but thinks a great deal" (25). Nesbit's, Paston's, and Stronach's fiction summons such thinking women. Eventually they would not be silent.

Endnotes

(1) I follow Lyn Pykett's description of New Woman fiction as consisting "mainly of works which fit W. T. Stead's (1894) description of the 'novel of the modern woman'; they are novels 'by a woman about

women from the standpoint of Woman” (5). Pykett further describes this fiction as “grounded in women writers’ attempts to find a form, or forms, in which to represent and articulate women’s experience, and women’s aspirations and anxieties, as well as anxieties about women” (5-6). This generously broad definition easily encompasses my texts. Pykett’s emphasis on “anxieties” also highlights the specific quality in them—that I explore through these works’ ambiguous conclusions—on which my readings turn.(^)

(2)My central claim thus makes more concrete and political Sally Mitchell’s description of college-focused fiction for girls as providing “a screen to project desires, a script with images, places, and situations where victories could be envisioned” (*New Girl* 50).(^)

(3)Mitchell seems to target the scholar-athlete character when mentioning that a common trope of college-focused fiction is “the reform of a girl whose ‘short hair’ and ‘masculine stride’ prejudice people against the college” (*New Girl* 52); the character remains a trope for Mitchell, not a potential catalyst for social change as I read her. Tracy J. R. Collins has linked athleticism to real and fictional examples of New Women. She points to multiple examples of New Women autobiographers who report that “they would not have been New Women” had “athleticism” not been integral in their lives (“The Fit” 87). Collins similarly argues that New Woman novels often link health and athleticism to women’s ability to make choices for themselves. While her work does not explicitly intertwine advanced education with the women’s fitness, Collins is influenced by the many histories of British women in higher education that foreground the fact that athletics were integral to women’s higher education. In part a response to the worry that if women strained themselves mentally they would not be good mothers, athletics were incorporated into the curriculum as a counterbalance to mental strain. Some of the most notable histories to explore such issues include Sheila Fletcher’s *Women First: The Female Tradition in English Physical Education 1880-1980* (1984); *From ‘Fair Sex’ to Feminism: Sport and the Socialization of Women in the Industrial and Post-Industrial Eras* (1987) edited by J. A. Mangan and Roberta J. Park; and Kathleen E. McCrone’s *Playing the Game: Sport and the Physical Emancipation of English Women, 1870-1914* (1988).(^)

(4)Sutherland offers examples of fiction that she believes could help women to consider and seize opportunities (162-66).(^)

(5)Influenced by both Flint’s and Pykett’s assertion of New Woman readers as an active, critical audience, Helen Bittel advocates a rereading of L. T. Meade’s *New Girl* fiction—that contains multiple university-educated characters—asserting that “we should not read Meade’s apparent negations of New Woman values and positions as negations per se, but rather as, in many cases the powerful presentation of multiple possibilities for reader evaluation” (para. 32). Explicitly highlighting the often “anti-feminist” endings of the novels, Bittel’s work is similar to my reading of fiction that lodges their protagonists in potentially confining marriages.(^)

(6)Madame Bergman-Österberg’s Physical Training College was the first and most influential two-year school for women who intended to work as gymnastic instructors; “Madame herself had trained 501 specialist teachers in thirty years” (May 126).(^)

(7)See my “Trained Bodies,” forthcoming in the *Victorian Review* (42.1 [Spring 2016]), that offers further background about the rise of female gymnastic training colleges, their involvement in the women’s suffrage movement, and their connection to “jujutsu-suffragettes.”(^)

(8) Mitchell nods to the possibility that “the swiftness [of] the last-sentence marriage itself [may be] a wink at its irrationality” and thus the story could still promote Laura’s stance against marriage (*New Girl* 66). Mitchell does not develop this reading and suggests it is as likely as is the reading that sees the marriage as subverting Laura’s feminist stance. (▲)

(9) I assert that the novel’s final description of the marriage of Ted Ferrar, the man with whom Candida might have formed a companionate marriage, and Sabina, Candida’s best friend—with its overt emphasis on Sabina giving Ted “undiscriminating admiration and spaniel-like devotion” and Ted’s delight in this now “exceptionally intelligent woman”—provokes readers to critically evaluate their marriage and the quickly following reunion of Candida and Adrian (276, 277). (▲)

(10) Collins similarly recognizes the almost absurdist tone of the novel’s conclusion, describing it this way: “With an Olympian condescension to the perverse society her father warned her about, Candida can parent both child and husband. She has an extraordinary and emancipated agency, and she elects to bestow its benefit in self-immolating her incarnation as a New Woman” (“Athletic Bodies” 217). As do I, Collins maintains that Candida chooses to stay with Adrian of her own free will. I add to that reading the suggestion that the novel uses that “perverse” choice to goad the reader into considering what other options could be made available to female caregivers. (▲)

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