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The Boston Atheneum contains letters from Prescott Townsend in Montana and Idaho to his mother and also letters from his World War I service. Each year he provided details of his life for his class reports at Harvard.

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Jeannette Howard Foster (1895-1981)

Virginia Elwood-Akers



Photo by Tee A. Corinne

In the early years of the twentieth century, a young and very innocent college junior named Jeannette Foster was on the student council at Rockford University in Illinois, when a meeting was called to discuss two young women who were to be judged in a "morals case." No details of the offense were given, beyond the fact that the two young women had locked themselves in their dormitory room together at every opportunity. Bewildered, Foster realized that the other students all seemed to know the nature of this serious offense and she was mortified by her ignorance. As soon as the meeting ended, Foster went to the library to search for answers. Having reached the conclusion that the embarrassment of her fellow council members, and the use of the term "morals case," seemed to indicate that the offense had been sexual, she looked in Henry Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, which she later said she had passed many times "without once having the impulse to look inside." There, in a chapter titled "Sexual Inversion in Women," in which Ellis discussed sexual relationships between women, Foster found her answer.

Perhaps Foster recognized herself in Ellis's study. She would later say that she had been attracted to women since she was a child. Perhaps, as a serious scholar, she was merely troubled by what was later described as "her lack of knowledge regarding female homosexuality." Whatever her reason, she began to compile a bibliography on the subject of what she called "sex variant" women. Foster selected the term "sex variant" because, as she said in her book, *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, it was neither rigid nor emotionally charged, and because its meaning was "no more than differing from a chosen standard" (Foster, 1985, "Introduction"). She defined the term to mean an *emotional* attraction between women, which is passionate and sex-

ual in nature, even if the sexual component is not conscious. At first concentrating on scientific and factual studies, she gradually added literary titles to the bibliography. Ultimately, she decided to limit the scope of her bibliography to literature, or what she called "imaginative writing." The bibliography grew into a narrative and was published more than forty years after it was begun. Foster's pioneering effort has been influential on virtually every subsequent scholar in the field of lesbian literature, and has led Karla Jay to acknowledge her as the "unchallenged foremother in this field" (1976, p. 34).

Jeannette Howard Foster was born November 3, 1895, in Oak Park, Illinois. Little is known of her youth or of her family. She was bookish and precocious, entering the University of Chicago when she was only seventeen, and going from there to Rockford College in Rockford, Illinois, from which she received an AB in chemistry and engineering in 1918. She returned to the University of Chicago and changed her studies completely, receiving an MA in English and American literature in 1922. For nearly ten years she taught literature and creative writing at Hamline University in Saint Paul, Minnesota, before deciding upon a career as a librarian. Graduating with a degree in library science in 1932, she found a position as science librarian at Antioch College in Ohio. Although she had continued to work on her bibliography, it was taking a position as a professor of library science at Drexel Institute in Philadelphia in 1937 that gave her access to library collections in the eastern United States and allowed her to begin her work.

Blessed with the ability to see herself and her scholarly efforts with a sense of humor, Foster told interviewer Karla Jay that "lots of funny things happened" to her during her years of research (1976, pp. 34-35). As an example, she told the story of her search for a book called *Mephistophela* by Catulle Mendes, published in France in 1890. Mendes' book was wildly popular at the time of its publication, when it had half a dozen printings in both French and English. By the time Foster was looking for it in Philadelphia, however, there were only four known copies in the United States. One was in Philadelphia but was in the library of the exclusive Rittenhouse Club, which allowed no women to enter its doors. Foster pleaded that she wanted only to use the library, which was in the front of the building, and none of the members of the club would even have to see her. She was archly told that women would not be admitted for *any* reason. Fortunately, Foster was acquainted with a member of the club, then an assistant librarian at the University of Pennsylvania. Amused, he agreed to check the book out for her to read, if she would read it in his office. Foster readily agreed, and read the more than 350 pages of *Mephistophela*, in French, sitting in a corner of the librarian's office. Foster found the ridiculous situation to be funny. She also saw the humor in an occasion when she dropped out of a library school field trip—reasoning that the graduate students were adults and didn't really

need her for a chaperone—in order to visit the Yale University Library, which held a rare copy of *Mary, a Fiction* by Mary Wollstonecroft. She had one day to read the entire book in order to include it into the bibliography; an important inclusion, since she described Wollstonecroft's book as "the first novel on female variance to be written by a woman" (Foster, 1956/1985, p. 55).

In 1948 Foster accepted a position as librarian at the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research in Bloomington, Indiana, which gave her access to a large collection on the subject of sexuality and allowed her to complete her research. It would be another ten years, however, before her own book would be published. Foster decided that it would be a good idea to start the title of her book off with the word *sex*, as "I had learned from searching bibliographies," she said, "a title beginning with the word *sex* couldn't be ignored." Still, Foster realized that it would not be easy to find a publisher for her book in the United States in the 1950s. Trade publishers were out of the question, and a dozen university presses also turned the book down. Rutgers University Press held the manuscript for over seven months before finally deciding they were unwilling to take a chance with publication. Finally Foster self-published the book with Vantage Press, investing \$2,000 of her own money. The experience with Vantage was an unhappy one. Editors changed Foster's prose, which infuriated the former professor of creative writing. She sent the manuscript back with edited parts reinstated, declaring, "That *stands*, or else." The editors capitulated, but charged her extra for "author's alterations" in order to return the manuscript to its original wording. Vantage published *Sex Variant Women in Literature* in 1956, but when the publishers asked for more money and Foster refused, she was told her royalties would be kept against what she owed them. Vantage then sold the rights to the British publisher Frederick Muller, Ltd., which published the book in 1958. Foster, who learned of the sale by reading an article in the periodical *Publishers Weekly*, did not receive any money from the sale or publication. The only monetary reward she received from her forty years of work was a check for \$240 when a secondhand dealer bought the 2,400 remaining copies of the book, from an original printing of 3,500, at ten cents a copy.

By the time the book was published, Foster was working as a reference librarian at the University of Kansas in Kansas City, Missouri. *Sex Variant Women in Literature* received only one review, and that a negative one, in a psychology publication. It was also briefly mentioned in a newspaper article. Foster's book seemed to be destined for oblivion. But fate, in the form of a young lesbian working in the catalog department of the Kansas City Public Library, intervened. Barbara Grier had seen the title mentioned in a library publication. The twenty-three-year-old Grier had been working on a bibliography of lesbian literature for seven years and had collected nearly

one hundred titles. Since she had been planning to write a book on what she thought was an original subject, she was both delighted and chagrined to learn that Foster had already done so. When she discovered that the author of *Sex Variant Women in Literature* was living in the same city, Grier immediately called her, and began a lifelong friendship with Foster.

Grier also became Foster's successor as bibliographer of lesbian literature. In 1956 the Daughters of Bilitis, a recently founded lesbian organization, began publication of a periodical called *The Ladder* which "soon instituted a careful recording of lesbian literature" (Grier, 1985, p. 355). Foster taught Grier review checking techniques and the younger woman began compiling records of new titles and also of old titles that may have been missed in prior years. Often Grier had to rely on intuition to recognize a title that might contain lesbians or lesbian literature, since mainstream reviewers rarely mentioned the subject. Many of the titles Grier selected were reviewed in *The Ladder*, which in 1967 published a bibliography of 2,000 titles, *The Lesbian in Literature*, co-authored by Gene Damon and Lee Stuart. Gene Damon is the pseudonym of Barbara Grier. Not surprisingly, *The Lesbian in Literature* was reviewed in *The Ladder* by Jeannette Foster, who had begun to contribute occasionally to the periodical.

"Writing a favorable review of a work in which one has been overgenerously cited might be taken as reciprocal back-scratching," Foster wrote (Foster, 1967, p. 17). But she went on to say that she considered Damon and Stuart's work "an excellent bibliography." Foster defended the inclusion in Damon and Stuart's book of the semipornographic original paperbacks that had proliferated at the time and that the bibliography identifies with a "T" for "trash." She pointed out that the paperbacks, although probably written by men as pornography, did include lesbians as subjects, and that inclusion was therefore justified.

During the late 1960s Jeannette Foster contributed both fiction and non-fiction articles to *The Ladder*. Besides reviewing *The Lesbian in Literature*, she wrote reviews of books such as Maurice Collis's *Somerville and Ross: A Biography*, which recounts the lives of writers Edith Somerville and Violet Martin, Frederick Brown's *An Impersonation of Angels: A Biography of Jean Cocteau*, and C. P. Snow's *The Sleep of Reason*. She also contributed fiction, using the pseudonyms Hilary Farr, Jan Addison, and Abigail Sanford. "Temple of Athene" by Hilary Farr, for instance, appeared in three parts in late 1967. It is the somewhat melodramatic story of poor Theodora's crush on the improbably named Lenox VanTuyll, and of lesbian tensions in a campus setting. Foster's contributions to *The Ladder* were not the first time she had contributed fiction to a periodical. In October 1927 her short story "Lucky Star" had appeared in the mainstream publication *Harper's Maga-*

zine. "Lucky Star" is also about an unrequited crush, but in this story the erstwhile lover is male, a visitor to a small town who has completely misinterpreted the lighthearted flirting of a married woman. Since the married woman does not seem to particularly care for her husband, it is possible that this story might also have been about two women if the circumstances of publication had been different.

Between the years 1914 and 1938 Jeannette Foster wrote passionate love poetry. In 1976 Foster's poems were published, along with poetry by Valerie Taylor, by Womanpress in a volume called *Two Women*. In the same year Naiad Press published *A Woman Appeared to Me*, Foster's translation of *Une Femme M'Apparut* by Renée Vivien. Since Diana Press had reprinted *Sex Variant Women in Literature* in 1975, Foster was delighted to have three of her creative endeavors in print at the same time, all of them published by lesbian-oriented presses. She was especially pleased with *A Woman Appeared to Me*, which was the first translation of the work based on the poet Vivien's affair with Violet Shilleto and her relationship with Natalie Barney; with the exception of a few poems, this was the first major Vivien work to be published. Vivien was one of the writers discussed in *Sex Variant Women in Literature* who was essentially "discovered" by Foster, although her work was known to a select few. Foster called Vivien a poet whose poetry "has been pronounced most perfect in form of any French verse written in the first quarter of the [20th] century" (Foster, 1985, p. 158). Foster is also credited with the "discovery" of Natalie Barney, a woman known as much for her salon in Paris, and for her open and daring lesbianism, as she was for her writing.

Little is known of Foster's private life. In interviews given at various times in her life she disclosed few details. She was quoted as saying that her circumspection was due to a wish to respect the privacy of her friends. It is known that she knew writer Janet Flanner when the two writers were both at the University of Chicago, and that she formed a friendship with poet May Sarton when Sarton was poet in residence at Lindenwood College, now Lindenwood University, in St. Charles, Missouri, where Foster had begun work as the assistant librarian in 1963. She was close to Barbara Grier and to writer Valerie Taylor. The poems in *Two Women* are clearly written to more than one woman, but the women are not named. In a recent article in Zimmerman's (2000) *Lesbian Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia*, Andrea Peterson disclosed that Foster had a long relationship with Hazel Toliver, a professor she had met at Lindenwood College. Foster was a member of the Daughters of Bilitis and did not disguise her identity as a lesbian, although she said that she was a member of a generation that, as she put it,

"concealed our gayness as if it were syphilis" (Hogan and Hudson, 1998, p. 218).

Foster was not a political person, but she did weigh in on the issue of whether lesbians should have a strong national organization. In 1968 she wrote a letter to the editor of *The Ladder* on that subject. The editor decided that Foster's comments on dominance within lesbian relationships were of sufficient interest to print the letter as a short article, and invited further comments from readers. In the article, "Dominance," Foster described herself as a member of the Daughters of Bilitis who had listened over the years to debates, discussions, and arguments among the members and who had found herself curious as to why a group of people "as closely homogeneous as any except a racial group" (Foster, 1968, p. 17) would have such dissensions. Foster's conclusion was that some members of "the sisterhood" had a strong need to dominate the others. Oddly, she identified these women as those who refused to marry men, insisted on taking a job whether or not they needed money, dressed as they pleased rather than in fashion, and openly proclaimed themselves as lesbians. Even in 1968 Foster's conclusions must have seemed strange to some readers of *The Ladder*. Foster went on to make the point, however, that even within homogeneous groups dissension will occur, and that forming a national organization such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), American Association of University Women (AAUW), or American Association of University Professors (AAUP) would be advantageous for the Daughters of Bilitis, because there is "quite literally safety in numbers."

Foster's comments indicate that she must have been circumspect in her personal life, and she never reported that her life had been difficult because of her lesbianism. The library environment in which she spent her life is not a hostile one for homosexuals, and it is unlikely that Foster would have encountered a great deal of open discrimination, especially because she was discreet in her personal life. In fact, librarians acclaimed her accomplishment in writing *Sex Variant Women in Literature*; in 1974, she was honored by the American Library Association with its third annual Gay Book Award. She was delighted. "My long respected ALA is willing to admit the existence . . . and even honor it . . . of Gaiety!" she is quoted as saying in Steven Hogan and Lee Hudson's (1998) *Completely Queer*. The publication of three of her works, and being honored by her peers, made the mid-1970s a happy time for Foster. Upon her retirement, she moved to Pocahontas, Arkansas, where she shared a home with Toliver and with a third friend, Dorothy Ross, who had been head of the physical education department at

Lindenwood College. But Foster was growing old and ill, and by the end of the decade she was partially paralyzed and living in a nursing home.

Lesbian scholars and others who admired her work made pilgrimages to Pocahontas, Arkansas, to meet Foster, now more than eighty years old. When it became apparent that Foster's financial resources were depleted, Valerie Taylor and photographer Tee Corinne placed an appeal in gay and lesbian publications for funds to assist her. Benefits and fundraisers were held to raise money for Foster's expenses. On July 26, 1981, Foster died at the age of eighty-six.

Jeannette Foster would be an important figure in the field of literature even if she had never written a word other than her massive literary study. At the time of its publication, little had been written on the subject of lesbian literature and in fact it was a subject rarely discussed in "polite" company. Foster boldly stated in her book that "feminine variance has persisted in human experience since the beginning of literary records." She went on to say that such variance had "repeatedly aroused sufficient interest to be the subject of literature, some of it good enough to have survived through many centuries against all odds." She carefully explained that she selected the term *sex variant* because it was neither rigid nor emotionally charged and reminded her readers that the word *variant* simply means different. She reserved the word *lesbian* for instances of overt sexual expression, and used the word *homosexual* as a synonym for *sex variant*. "It will be employed here," she wrote in her book, "only when needed to relieve verbal monotony" (Foster, 1985, p. 13).

Foster began her study with Sappho, the Greek poet from the sixth century B.C., and made her way briskly through the centuries to 1951, ending with a discussion of (Patricia Highsmith) Claire Morgan's *The Price of Salt*. In the book's nearly 400 pages Foster discussed both the literary efforts and the personal lives of well-known figures such as George Eliot, George Sand, Emily Dickinson, and Emily Brontë. More important, she wrote also of little-known writers such as sixteenth-century poet Louise Labé, twentieth-century novelist Gale Wilhelm, and the French poets and literary figures Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney. *Sex Variant Women in Literature* also devotes many pages to lesbian and variant characters in literature, many of them created by male authors. *Sex Variant Women in Literature* is often cited as one of the most important works in the field of lesbian literature. According to the online service Literature Resource Center, Foster's courageous early work, "contributed significantly to the development of a lesbian culture in the twentieth century."

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Pearl M. Hart (1890-1975)

Karen C. Sendziak



Gerber/Hart Library

Pearl M. Hart practiced law in Chicago from 1914 to 1975 as an advocate for children, women, immigrants, and gay men and lesbians. One of the first female attorneys in the city to specialize in criminal law, she was remarkable for her commanding physical and intellectual presence. The size of her five-feet, eleven-and-a-half-inch and 200-pound frame was surpassed only by her generosity of spirit. Journalist I. F. Stone describe her affectionately as a “big benevolent Brunnhilde of a woman, six feet tall with gray hair, grandmotherly expression, and one of those round unmistakable Russian Jewish faces” who was “famous throughout the Midwest for a life-

time of devotion to the least lucrative and most oppressed kind of clients” (Stone, 1953, p. 31). Hart’s direct involvement with one of these groups, gay and lesbians, did not emerge until the final two decades of her life, although she early on had defended gay men.

Pearl Hart was born in Traverse City, Michigan, on April 7, 1890, as Pearly Minne Harchovsky, but she was known as Hart for most of her life. Both her father, David, an Orthodox rabbi, and her mother, Rebecca, had emigrated from Russia. She was the youngest of the couple’s five daughters, and the only one born in the United States. By her own account, her childhood was happy: “. . . I was particularly fortunate in that everyone loved me a lot, and spoiled me” (Weiner, 1975).

The family moved from Traverse City to Chicago when Hart was a preschooler and settled in the bustling neighborhoods of the near west side among fellow Jewish emigrés from Eastern Europe. She was educated in the Chicago public school system, and according to the poet and author Valerie Taylor, labored in a garment factory as a teenager. Evidence of her leader-