



# BACKWARD MODERNISM AND QUEERLY DESIRING WOMEN IN EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY BRITISH AND FRENCH FICTION ROSAMOND LEHMANN AND JEANNE GALZY

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Questo articolo intende sviluppare una ricerca comparata e trasversale sulla rappresentazione delle donne queer in Europa all'inizio del ventesimo secolo. Attraverso un confronto critico con la letteratura su lesbismo e modernismo, l'analisi prende le mosse dal concetto di “modernismo nostalgico” di Heather Love, e dalla nozione di “confluenza” di Susan Lanser, per porre a confronto due romanzi ancora poco studiati che narrano le esperienze queer di due giovani donne in Inghilterra e Francia: *Dusty Answer* di Rosamund Lehmann (1927) e *Jeunes filles en serre chaude* (1934) di Jeanne Galzy. Nei due romanzi identifichiamo diversi punti cruciali di convergenza, e dimostriamo che, anche se sono entrambi ambigui nelle loro descrizioni delle sessualità non-normative, essi narrano come le esperienze sessuali queer in giovane età non siano solo “fasi transitorie”, ma abbiano invece una funzione trasformativa.

This article seeks to develop comparative, transversal scholarship on the representation of queer women in Europe in the early 20th century. Engaging critically with associations of lesbians with modernism, analysis draws on Heather Love's concept of “backward modernism”, and Susan Lanser's notion of “confluence” to bring into dialogue two underexplored novels that recount the queer experiences of young women in England and France: Rosamund Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* (1927) and Jeanne Galzy's *Jeunes filles en serre chaude* (1934). We identify several striking points of convergence between the novels, and argue that while they are both ambiguous in their portrayal of non-normative sexuality, they indicate how early queer sexual experiences may be far from a “passing phase”; rather they are transformative.

## I INTRODUCTION

Many representations of women who desired women in late 19th century and early 20th century Europe have significant cross-cultural resonances, as they were forged across cultures, languages and genres. Emerging sexological discourses around sexual inversion—largely understood as the channelling of sexual desire towards someone of the same sex—were very influential in shaping the “new” figure of the “homosexual”.<sup>1</sup> These discourses were inspired, in turn, by literary representations of non-normative identities. Thus, the two disciplinary fields of sexology and fiction sometimes overlapped, and there are many instances of reciprocal influence between them. For example, we might think of the Italian anthropologists Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero citing novels by Denis Diderot and Théophile Gautier as though they were empirical studies which confirmed the incidence of homo-

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<sup>1</sup> For a helpful overview of sexological discourses in this period, see LUCY BLAND and LAURA DOAN (Eds), *Sexology Uncensored. The Documents of Sexual Science*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1998.

sexuality in society;<sup>2</sup> we might recall Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), that engages closely with medical definitions of the so-called sexual pathologies, and precisely the theory of sexual inversion put forward by Krafft-Ebing in *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886).<sup>3</sup> Crucially, scholars like Chiara Beccalossi have noted the ambiguities in sexological studies of this period: they are not monolithic theories but are discursive constructions that mobilise complex and shifting ideas, and often contain internal contradictions.<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, novels about women who desired women expressed ambiguous stances, thus both reflecting and influencing sexological writings. To date, little research has been conducted to trace and analyse the movement and evolution of these discourses on women desiring women across Europe.<sup>5</sup>

With this in mind, this article seeks to open up a transversal, cross-cultural slant in critical reflection on European literary representations of queerly desiring women in the early 20th century. It builds on the crucial work that has been done on novels in different contexts,<sup>6</sup> and focuses on two key issues: first, it traces the ways in which medical pathologisation, stigma and broader anxieties surrounding homoerotic desire resonated in literature; second, it continues to expand ongoing debates about the idea of “lesbian modernism”. Many different narratives have been put forward, including: the idea that works exploring non-normative women’s sexuality, by writers such as Djuna Barnes and Gertrude Stein, made significant contributions to the aesthetics of the modernist project as a whole;<sup>7</sup> the bold statement that there is «no modernism without lesbians»;<sup>8</sup> and more nuanced appraisals, noting, for example, the conservative tendencies of some “Sapphic” modernists.<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth English has recently reflected on the idea that «non-modernist forms of writing [were] significant in the narrative of lesbian moderni-

<sup>2</sup> CESARE LOMBROSO e GUGLIELMO FERRERO, *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale* (1893), Milano, Edizioni Et al., 2009, pp. 418-419; CHARLOTTE ROSS, *Eccentricity and Sameness. Discourses on Lesbianism and Desire between Women in Italy, 1860s-1930s*, Bern, Oxford-New York, Peter Lang, 2015, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> See HEIKE BAUER, *Richard von Krafft-Ebing's Psychopathia Sexualis as Sexual Sourcebook for Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness*, in «Critical Survey», XV, 3 (2003), pp. 23-38.

<sup>4</sup> CHIARA BECCALOSSO, *Female Sexual Inversion. Same-Sex Desires in Italian and British Sexology, c.1870-1920*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> ANNA KATHARINA SCHAFFNER has done important work on the reciprocal relationship between sexological and literary texts, but her study focuses on male authors. See ANNA KATHARINA SCHAFFNER, *Modernism and Perversion: Sexual Deviance in Sexology and Literature. 1850-1930*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> This includes, for example, LAURA DOAN on British lesbian culture (*Fashioning Sapphism. The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001), JENNIFER WÆLTI-WALTERS' study on lesbians in French literature (*Damned Women: Lesbians in French Novels, 1796-1996*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), and CHARLOTTE ROSS' work on the representation of desire between women in Italian culture (*Eccentricity and Sameness*, cit.).

<sup>7</sup> ELIZABETH ENGLISH, *Lesbian Modernism. Censorship, Sexuality and Genre Fiction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2015, pp. 13-15.

<sup>8</sup> DIANA SOUHAMI, *No Modernism without Lesbians*, London, Head of Zeus, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> LAURA DOAN, “Woman’s Place is the home”: *Conservative Sapphic Modernity*, in *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, women and national culture* edited by LAURA DOAN and JANE GARRITY, New York, Palgrave, 2006, pp. 91-107, p. 95.

sm», and sought to open up these narratives by exploring «lower brow» genre fiction as non-realist texts that allowed for innovation in terms of “lesbian” content.<sup>10</sup> Following this lead, and inspired by Heather Love’s idea of “backward modernism”,<sup>11</sup> this article seeks to unravel both the idea of “lesbian” and that of “modernism” in innovative ways, also by extending the focus of analysis to cross-cultural contexts.

Love’s focus is on the ambivalence she sees at the heart of the modernist period, as some authors struggled against the drive to look “forward”, conceptually and aesthetically. Instead of being caught up in or driving this urge for newness, they turned “back”; queer figures, often social outsiders, frequently inhabited particular zones of marginality, including this kind of temporal liminality. Love’s aim is to explore modernism’s “others”, in order to complicate the dual positions of the stigmatized “homosexual” as defined by the sexologists and evolving “modern” homosexual subjectivity.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the texts we explore are not examples of high modernist art, but rather understated genre fiction; they narrate not the radical, empowering Sapphic idealism of Nathalie Barney’s coterie, but isolated young women from rural backgrounds who experience queer desire in different ways. Yet, as English suggests, these texts can be situated on the fringes of modernism, as having contributed in some way to evolving, broader discourses on lesbianism. Moreover, unravelling the concept of “lesbian”, the texts we explore depict bisexual or queer desire, and incestuous longings. They complicate normative understandings of sexual labels, and elude reductive categorization.

We analyse two novels, Rosamond Nina Lehmann’s *Dusty Answer* (1927), and Jeanne Galzy’s *Jeunes filles en serre chaude* (*Young Girls in a Hothouse*, 1934). Both authors were largely neglected by critics for many years, although they arguably merit much more attention. Moreover, it is only recently that scholars have begun to engage productively with the queer content in these novels.<sup>13</sup> They both narrate desire between young women (and men), and their protagonists spend much or part of the novel at an all girls’ college. Thus, they engage with anxieties expressed about all-female educational establishments, which had been provoking moral panic in authors, critics, lawyers and scientists since the late 19th century, including Emile Zola, and the Italian sociologists Giulio Obici and Giovanni Marchesini.<sup>14</sup> These self-pro-

<sup>10</sup> E. ENGLISH, *Lesbian Modernism*, cit., p.14.

<sup>11</sup> HEATHER LOVE, *Feeling Backward. Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Harvard MA, Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Ivi, pp. 6-7.

<sup>13</sup> Notable examples of analyses which elide queer content are JONATHAN COE’S introduction to *Dusty Answer* (2006) and RAYMOND HUARD’S biography of Galzy (*Jeanne Galzy romancière, où la surprise de vivre*, Uzès, Inclinaison, 2009). More helpfully, J. WAELTI-WALTERS, *Damned Women*, cit., pp. 101-102), JENNIFER E. MILLIGAN, *The Forgotten Generation. French Women Writers of the Inter-war Period*, Oxford-New York, Berg, 1996, pp. 177-179, have commented on lesbian desire in Galzy’s novel; one of the few full-length monographs on Lehmann by JUDY SIMONS, *Rosamond Lehmann*, Liverpool, Liverpool UP, 2004, similarly explores same-sex desire in Lehmann’s novels.

<sup>14</sup> ÉMILE ZOLA, *Nana*, Paris, Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1880; ID., «Preface», in ADOLPHE BELOT, *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme* (1879), edited by CHRISTOPHER RIVERS, New York, The Modern Languages Association of America, 2002, pp. 3-7; GIULIO OBICI e GIOVANNI MARCHESINI, *Le «amicizie» di collegio. Ricerche sulle prime manifestazioni dell’amore sessuale* (1898), Roma-Milano, Dante Alighieri, 1905.

claimed “authorities” argued that same-sex desire was usually a “passing phase”. To avoid succumbing to it, girls should be kept at home and educated individually, rather than being exposed to the “corrupt” environment of the girls’ school, where adolescent passions, the lack of contact with boys, and “over-education” induced young women to deviate from the “correct” path towards marriage and motherhood.<sup>15</sup>

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Lillian Faderman have analysed such relationships, calling them “romantic friendships”. They have challenged discrete categories of sexual “deviance”, suggesting, instead, that forms of female sexual and emotional intimacy should be read as falling on a continuum of affect.<sup>16</sup> However, as Lisa Moore has pointed out, by framing these friendships as romantic, and making them socially “acceptable” – or “speakable”, both scholars risk side-lining the sexual aspect of these relationships.<sup>17</sup> In her work on female friendships and crushes in all-girls’ boarding schools in the British context during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, Martha Vicinus starts from the assumption that it is virtually impossible to «answer the question of precisely how sexually aware the participants were in these “new” crushes, but surely some were, while others were not».<sup>18</sup> She proposes that such friendships only began to be demonized outside specialist scientific publications in the 1920s.<sup>19</sup> Moore assumes a contrasting view emphasizing the degree of prohibition that surrounded female homoerotic desire even at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup>

Drawing on a range of critical and theoretical debates—from the notion of “Romantic friendship” and lesbian desire to “backward modernism”—we explore the “other”, “non-modern” queer women in these texts, in relation to anxieties about non-normative desires. In comparing these texts, published around the same time, in different countries and languages, our aim is to show how instructive it can be to trace transcultural depictions of an emerging, reluctantly queer woman, who supplements existing, better-known figures, from Radclyffe Hall’s Stephen Gordon to characters created by Barney, Vivien and other well-known lesbian modernist writers. Moreover, in our queer comparative analysis, we trace some of the similarities, or what Susan Lanser has called “confluence” between the texts. We show that, while they both convey negative discourses about female homoeroticism, they also offer more affirming narratives about young women who desire queerly, thus reflecting the ambiguities and internal contradictions of sexological and so-

<sup>15</sup> MARTHA VICINUS, *Distance and Desire: English Boarding-School Friendships*, in «Signs», IX, 4 (1984), pp. 600-622.

<sup>16</sup> CARROLL SMITH-ROSENBERG, *The Female World of Love and Ritual. Relations between Women in Nineteenth Century America*, in *Feminism and History*, edited by JOAN WALLACH SCOTT, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 366-397, pp. 387-388; LILLIAN FADERMAN, *Surpassing the Love of Men. Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, London, Virago, 1997, p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> LISA MOORE, *Something More Tender Still than Friendship. Romantic Friendship in Early-Nineteenth-Century England*, in «Feminist Studies», XVIII, 3 (1992), pp. 499-520, p. 503.

<sup>18</sup> M. VICINUS, *Distance and Desire*, cit., pp. 601-602.

<sup>19</sup> Ivi, p. 621.

<sup>20</sup> L. MOORE, *Something More Tender Still than Friendship*, cit., p. 501.

ciocultural discourses of the time in relation to the social and moral anxieties about all girls' schools. Furthermore, we argue that, even though many commentators considered same-sex desire in young women as a passing phase, these novels narrate situations in which relationships with other young women, and the feelings they evoke, have a profound, lasting and transformative effect on the protagonists.

## 2 ROSAMUND LEHMANN'S DUSTY ANSWER

Rosamond Lehmann (1901-1990) is a lesser studied member of the Bloomsbury group. She was an accomplished novelist, essayist, editor, reviewer, broadcaster and a translator from the French – in 1948 her translation of Jacques Lemarchand's *Genevieve* won the Denyse Clairouin Prize. She regularly contributed to the leading papers of her day, including *The Listener*, *The Spectator* and *The New Statesman* and *Nation*. During the Second World War she authored short stories for her brother's magazine, *New Writing*. She wrote most of her fictional work in the period between the wars – *Dusty Answer* (1927), *A Note in Music* (1930), *Invitation to the Waltz* (1932), *The Weather in the Streets* (1936) – whereas afterwards the gap between her next novels is increasingly longer: *The Ballad and the Source* was published in 1944, while *The Echoing Grove* in 1953. The tragic premature death of her daughter Sally had a powerful impact on her work: her last two novels appeared much later (*The Swan in the Evening* in 1967 and *A Sea-Grape Tree* in 1976). Critics agree on the fact that her later fiction was not at the same quality of her early work.<sup>21</sup> In 1982 she was appointed a CBE for services to literature, and in 1987 was made a Companion of Literature by the Royal Society of Literature.

According to Judy Simons, Lehmann's writing is «[s]imultaneously subjective and ironic, anti-establishment and traditional, ethereal and pragmatic, [and] displays the contradictory impulses that bridge the gap between the mainstream narrative tradition and a twentieth-century modernist consciousness».<sup>22</sup> This tension between tradition and innovation, alongside a nostalgic, almost idealised view of the pre-war era—which we might identify as a form of “backward modernism”—animates her first novel, *Dusty Answer*. Published in 1927, Lehmann's first work was very successful in the UK and in the US, and was translated quickly into both French (1928) and Italian (1930).<sup>23</sup> It is about the personal and sentimental growth of the protagonist, Judith Earle, from childhood to womanhood, and focuses on her emotional and sexual awakening.

The novel is divided into five parts. Each section is about a phase of this coming-of-age narrative, starting when she is 18. It then takes us back to her childhood and then back again to the narrative present, in a sort of queer temporal circularity. Judith is the only child of a well-to-do family and grows

<sup>21</sup> SHUSHA GUPPY, *Rosamond Lehmann. The Art of Fiction* 88, in «The Paris Review», 96 (1985), p. 169; ANDREA LEWIS, *Revisiting the Novels of Rosamond Lehmann*, in «The English Academy Review», XIV, 1 (1997), pp. 49-58; J. SIMONS, *Rosamond Lehmann*, cit.

<sup>22</sup> Ivi, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> See MARGARET T. GUSTAFSON, *Rosamond Lehmann: A Bibliography*, in «Twentieth Century Literature», IV, 4 (1959), pp. 143-47; Mary Wardle, *Same Difference? Translating 'sensitive texts'*, in «Vertimo Studijos», 10, 2017, url <https://doi.org/10.15388/VertStud.2017.10.11292> (accessed 25 January 2021).

up in a big house in the Thames valley reared by a governess. Her closest neighbours are the wealthy Fyfe cousins, who go there for the Summer holidays: Charles, Julian, Roddy, Martin and Mariella. In the course of the narrative, each cousin becomes a potential suitor for Judith. The first one is Charles, who is idealised by the young protagonist as the perfect embodiment of beauty: «Charlie was beautiful as a prince» (p. 13).<sup>24</sup> However, the first world war marks the abrupt end of this early Edwardian idyllic phase and the end of Charles' life while he was serving as a soldier in France. Before leaving he had unexpectedly married Mariella and she bore a child. This is Judith's first traumatic event. The Fyfes return to their countryside house a few years later. Mariella is the unhappy mother of Peter, Charles' son.<sup>25</sup> Judith feels quite drawn apart from the group (DA, p. 56) but then she develops a special relationship with Roddy, whom she finds sensitive and caring.

However, Judith soon realises that there is another person in the house that spends most of his time with Roddy: Tony Baring, a friend from Cambridge University. As the narrative proceeds, it becomes increasingly clear that Judith likes Roddy and that the latter is involved with Tony, who embodies the figure of the Cambridge homosexual student.<sup>26</sup> In one crucial episode of the novel, Tony and Roddy lie on a sofa embracing each other and Judith and Tony exchange glances full of jealousy towards each other. This triangulation of queer desire marks the moment in which Judith acknowledges that Tony and Roddy are not just friends. In addition, it is also a proleptic anticipation of the queer world animating university life which awaits Judith herself.

It is relevant here to mention René Girard's concept of "triangular desire" (1965), in which he states that desire always happens between at least three parties and that the desired object is given value from something or someone outside itself. This notion entails the possibility of questioning earlier, unproblematised directions, drives and motives for love and desires within literary texts. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has discussed and developed this concept in *Between Men* (1985). She coined the expression "homosocial desire" by pulling relationships between individuals of the same sex into a potentially erotic sphere, thus creating further possibilities for questioning the hegemonic status of different sexual desire within literary interpretations. *Dusty Answer* is full of references to male homosociality, especially in relation to the university environment (see pp. 100-101) and queer erotic triangles which trigger a range of different emotions that are explored in the novel, such as love, (unuttered) physical desire, jealousy, and ultimately disillusionment.

The central section of the novel is about Judith's experience at one of the all-women's colleges at Cambridge. It is the first time that the privately educated Judith attends an institution. She soon makes friends with Jennifer Baird, and they embark on an emotionally charged relationship. Significantly,

<sup>24</sup> ROSAMOND LEHMANN, *Dusty Answer*, London, Virago, 2006, p. 13. Henceforth this novel will be referred to as DA in the text, followed by page number.

<sup>25</sup> Mariella's parental role is taken over by Julian, who becomes a guardian for the child. Mariella is the only female character who, while endorsing and fulfilling a normative heterosexual role, defies expectations as she withdraws from her expected role as mother. Likewise, Julian – who remains single – happily takes on his role as a father of choice.

<sup>26</sup> See MEREDITH MILLER, *Lesbian, Gay and Trans Bildungsromane*, in SARAH GRAHAM (ED.) *A History of the Bildungsroman*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2019, pp. 239-266, p. 247.

during their first encounter, Jennifer introduces herself by evoking images of joyful and sensual natural fertility: colours, fruit, taste, smells are all associated with sensuousness (DA, p. 138) and frequently recur in passages depicting the women together.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Jennifer soon displays her hedonistic, Dionysian view of life (DA, pp. 118ff). The description of the special ‘friendship’ between Judith and Jennifer is rich with references to their embodied beauty and mutual physical appreciation, as well as Pagan ideas of perfect, idealised beauty, as it clear for example in a scene when they swim alone together:

[Jennifer] stood up, stretching white arms above her head. Her cloud of hair was vivid in the blue air. Her back was slender and strong and faultlessly moulded. “Glorious, glorious pagan that I adore!” *whispered the voice in Judith that could never speak out* [...] “You are so lovely,” Jennifer said watching her [...] They spent the afternoon in the shade of a blossoming may bush. All round them the new green of the fields was matted over with a rich and solid layer of buttercup yellow. Jennifer lay flat on her back with the utter relaxed immobility of an animal, replenishing her vitality through every nerve (DA, p. 137, our emphasis)

Unlike Judith, who cannot overtly “speak out”, Jennifer instead articulates her feelings thus showing an awareness of her own sexuality: «You mustn't love anybody [...] I should be jealous [...] I love you» (DA, p. 130). Significantly, Judith and Jennifer are not isolated in the girls' community in Cambridge; rather, they draw a circle of friends around them and organise encounters in Jennifer's room every night. However, differences between them start to emerge, and this is emphasised by a switch of narratorial voice, from an omniscient to a second-person narrator who addresses Judith directly. This is a crucial passage as it highlights the distinction between the two heroines and subtly foresees the end of their relationship, while at the same time praising the value of difference and instability (DA, p. 132).

An abrupt change to this state of affairs is caused by the arrival of Geraldine Manners, who soon becomes Jennifer's new companion. Judith's antagonist is described like a textbook sexual invert as depicted by sexologists such as Lombroso and Ferrero.<sup>28</sup> She has short black hair, a mannish look, and is unfriendly and cold:

The hair was black, short, brushed straight back from the forehead [...] the heavy eyebrows came low and level on the low broad brow; the eyes were long slits, dark-circled, the cheeks were pale, the jaw heavy and masculine. All the meaning of the face was concentrated in the mouth, the strange wide lips laid rather flat on the face, sulky, passionate, weary, eager. (DA, p. 161, our emphasis)

The repetition of «heavy» and the emphasis on the «darkness» of Geraldine's traits seem to evoke the psychological aspects of her «masculine», ruthless personality. Judith and Geraldine confront each other in an argument about Jennifer. After that, Jennifer isolates herself as she feels ill and

<sup>27</sup> The association of two women lovers with colourful and ripe fruit is reminiscent of Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862), a powerful lesbian archetypical text.

<sup>28</sup> C. LOMBROSO E G. FERRERO, *La donna delinquente*, cit., pp. 426, 430.

decides to leave college for good. She disappears from Judith's life and they have a final exchange the night before she leaves. Jennifer asks her not to write to her – she'll be the first to get in touch with her. The trope of unspeakability that comes up several times in their relationship, is pivotal in this final conversation (DA, p. 179).

Significantly, the lesbian triangulation which characterises this central section of the novel involves three women with different gender identities. Jennifer and Judith are two feminine characters, and their relationship does not replicate or emulate heterosexual dynamics, but is rather more fluid and oscillates ambiguously between special friendship and love affair.<sup>29</sup> Instead, Geraldine is stigmatised as a mannish lesbian, and her relationship with Jennifer is easily recognisable as somehow re-enacting heterosexual dynamics. As a consequence, according to Andrea Lewis,

Lehmann removes the recognizable lesbian relationship from the novel, although not without having explored Judith and Jennifer's less-recognizable lesbian relationship. Nevertheless, Lehmann effects what Terry Castle refers to as the "ghosting of the lesbian" in both Jennifer and Geraldine; both are drained of their 'sensual and moral authority' and then exorcised.<sup>30</sup>

On one level, we see here an affirmation of lesbianism as ultimately impossible, doomed and fleeting: backward, and stigmatised.<sup>31</sup> However, Judith does not disavow her love for Jennifer; rather, her strong disillusionment is experienced as a "natural" phase of her life. When she goes home after finishing her studies at Cambridge, she resumes her connection with the Fyfes and especially with Roddy, with whom she becomes closer and more intimate. They have a brief intimate liaison by the lake and she later declares her feelings in a letter, full of hope for the future, but Roddy never replies. The other two cousins, Julian and Martin, are also eventually put out of the picture: Martin proposes to her while Julian asks her to become his lover, but she refuses them both.

Eventually, even though the four cousins were theoretically all potential suitors, Judith chooses to remain alone. Rejecting marriage was a rather unusual choice for a woman at the time, and confirms Judith as an unconventional character who sidesteps and moves beyond normative relationships. This

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<sup>29</sup> This is probably the aspect that saved the novel from being censored, unlike Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, which would be banned a year later. However, the novel and its lesbian subplot nevertheless gave rise to negative criticism (WENDY POLLARD, *Rosamond Lehmann and Her Critics. The Vagaries of Literary Reception*, London, Ashgate, 2004; GILLIAN TINDALL, *Rosamond Lehmann. An Appreciation*, London, The Hogarth Press / Chatto & Windus, 1985). From a legal viewpoint, in Britain, in 1921, some members of the British parliament had tried, unsuccessfully, to outlaw lesbianism, as they had done with male homosexuality under the 1885 Labouchère amendment. One reason why the law failed to pass was an anxiety that legislating against female homosexuality would draw it to the attention of susceptible women: see ANDREA LEWIS, "Glorious Pagan That I Adore". *Resisting the National Reproductive Imperative in Rosamond Lehmann's Dusty Answer*, in «Studies in the Novel», XXXI, 3 (1999), pp. 357-371, p. 258. However, this attempt at silencing was undone in 1928 when the high-profile obscenity case against Radclyffe Hall shone a spotlight on queer desire. While Stephen Gordon identifies as an "invert", Judith and Jennifer are both quite feminine, and while their feelings are powerful, their relationship remains ambiguously on the verge of the unspoken.

<sup>30</sup> Ivi, p. 368.

<sup>31</sup> H. LOVE, *Feeling Backward*, cit., p. 4.



is anticipated in the epigraph to the novel, taken from George Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862) which points to the complexity of the themes developed in the narrative, including Judith's uncertain present: «Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul | When hot for certainties in this our life!». Thus, even if Lehmann adopts a certain realist style typical of sentimental novels with which she has been associated,<sup>32</sup> in *Dusty Answer* she weaves a number of queer tensions that, ultimately, remain open and unresolved. Judith is neither a stigmatised homosexual, nor a trailblazing modern queer character; nevertheless she is a woman who seeks her own path without being constrained by social norms. She cannot control the desires of those around her but she is open to many different forms of relationship.

### 3 JEANNE GALZY'S HOT HOUSE

Many of the tensions around homoeroticism between women, and ambiguous approaches to modernism conveyed in Lehmann's text can be identified in the work of Jeanne Galzy. In France, Galzy (1883-1977) published several novels, including several that dealt with desire between women.<sup>33</sup> Born in Montpellier, she went on to study at the *École normale supérieure de jeunes filles* in Sèvres, which had been immortalised in fiction by Gabrielle Réval in *Les Sevriennes* (1900). Galzy subsequently worked as a teacher in schools in Montpellier, Amiens and finally in Paris, where she frequented queer women intellectuals such as Renée Vivien and Nathalie Barney, and was a member of Barney's *Académie de femmes*, founded in 1927. Galzy won several literary awards, including the Prix femina (1923), later serving on the jury for the prize for many years, and her works were generally well received. She continued to write until the end of her life, which was rather solitary and humble.

Like many of her novels, *Young Girls in a Hothouse* is considered to be based on Galzy's own experiences at Sèvres, although Galzy refuted this, including an explicit «Avertissement» as clarification to the reader that this was not a *roman à clef*, but simply set in a context which she knew.<sup>34</sup> Isabelle Rives, the protagonist, is studying to become a teacher at Sèvres, and develops a sexually charged relationship with her English tutor, Gladys Benz. Isabelle fantasizes about Gladys, enjoying secretly savouring her tutor's name in her mouth,<sup>35</sup> and later they spend many hours together in the privacy of Gladys' room, where they embrace and caress one another. On one occasion they lean out of the window and drink the rain together from Isabelle's hand, and share an intimate moment in which Isabelle feels every fibre of her being full of joy at this closeness (YGH, p. 184). The relationship between the women is presented as potentially scandalous and embarrassing, causing Isabelle to blush violently on many occasions, and to tip-toe secretly to Gladys' room without being seen by other girls. She feels a strong sense of possessiveness

<sup>32</sup> See G. TINDALL, *Rosamond Lehmann*, cit., and J. SIMONS, *Rosamond Lehmann*, cit.

<sup>33</sup> For example, J. WAELTI-WALTERS (*Damned Women*, cit., pp. 99-101) discusses oblique homoeroticism in *L'initiatrice aux mains vides* (transl. as *Burnt Offering*, 1929), and *Les démons de la solitude* (transl. as *The Demons of Solitude*, 1931).

<sup>34</sup> J. MILLIGAN *The Forgotten Generation*, cit., p. 97.

<sup>35</sup> JEANNE GALZY, *Jeunes filles en serre chaude*, Paris, Gallimard, 1934, p. 112. From now on, this is abbreviated to YGH.

about Gladys, implying there is something exclusive about this particular friendship.

Isabelle also socialises outside the all-female environment of the school, with the male friends of one of her classmates' brothers. It is through this group that she meets Marien, who becomes an alternative object of desire, although he is engaged to her school friend Suzanne. In her mind, Isabelle struggles with the feelings that draw her first to Gladys, and then to Marien, as well as with jealousy that they might develop a relationship that excludes her. One night, when she is staying in a friend's country house with classmates (including Suzanne) and a group of young male friends, including Marien, she and Marien meet outside and kiss, passionately. However, subsequently, Isabelle's worst fears come to pass, as she discovers that Marien and Gladys are indeed intimately involved—much to Suzanne's dismay. Desperate and anguished, Isabelle fails her final exam, and leaves the school by train to return home, alone.

In Milligan's view, the novel contrasts with Belle Epoque "Sapphic" authors, such as Liane de Pougy and Nathalie Barney, who focussed on women-only environments and glorified love between women. Instead, Galzy's work can be considered alongside that of authors such as Lucie Delarue-Mardus and Romaine Brooks, writing largely in the interwar period, who «wholeheartedly rejected this utopic segregated vision of sapphism, and chose to examine lesbian relationships within a wider context».<sup>36</sup> Milligan argues that Galzy's novel superimposes an aggressive, penetrative heterosexual relationship over Isabelle and Gladys' bond and that Isabelle can only fully experience her desire for Gladys by fantasising an intimate moment between Gladys and Marien, and superimposing herself over Marien (HGY, p.117-18).<sup>37</sup> For Waelti-Waters, Gladys is a spectre of a damned nineteenth-century lesbian who haunts the novel, confirmed by Isabelle's allusion to Baudelaire's *Le Femmes Damnées*, «impure thoughts», Freud and psychiatry.<sup>38</sup> Certainly, Isabelle's feelings for Gladys, and her «murderous rage» at discovering Gladys' betrayal, lead to powerful expressions of anger (such as ripping Gladys' dress to shreds, see YGH, pp. 267, 274) that seem to confirm problematic associations of homoeroticism in girls' schools with hysteria.<sup>39</sup> We suggest that Galzy's novel constitutes a fascinating example of ambiguous backward modernism, on several levels. First, while Galzy herself frequents the *Académie des femmes* and exchanged many letters with Nathalie Barney throughout her life,<sup>40</sup> she has chosen to depict not «overt lesbian relationships»,<sup>41</sup> but instead a rather confused and isolated young woman. Isabelle finds herself in an all-female school, one which allows her some degree of freedom, but it

<sup>36</sup> J. MILLIGAN, *The Forgotten Generation*, cit., pp. 176-177.

<sup>37</sup> Ivi, pp. 178-179.

<sup>38</sup> J. WAELTI-WATERS, *Damned Women*, cit., pp. 101-02; YGH, p. 274. This and all other translations are our own.

<sup>39</sup> LAURA DOAN, «Acts of Female Indecency»: *Sexology's Intervention in Legislating Lesbianism*, in *Sexology in Culture. Labelling Bodies and Desires*, edited by LUCY BLAND and LAURA DOAN, Oxford, Polity, 1998, pp. 199-213, p. 203.

<sup>40</sup> R. HUARD, *Jeanne Galzy romancière*, cit., p. 109.

<sup>41</sup> J. MILLIGAN, *The Forgotten Generation*, cit., p. 40.

remains an environment where issues such as sexuality are not discussed openly. Second, agreeing with Milligan's reading of Gladys as a hangover from nineteenth-century vampiristic lesbians, she too adds a layer of "backwardness". Isabelle seems to want all-consuming passion that will almost annihilate her, feeling giddy as she loses herself in Gladys (YGH, p. 152), and while there are moments of calm, reciprocal intimacy between them, the relationship is also marked by a clear power imbalance, since Gladys is a tutor, and by Isabelle's strong feelings of jealousy and a desire to possess Gladys. One the one hand, there is a partial refusal of the homophobic interpretation of relationships between women in girls' schools as featuring older «congenitally predisposed» tutors who prey on younger girls:<sup>42</sup> Gladys is potentially bisexual; and it is Isabelle who seeks her out. However, their relationship is far from being a celebration of the bond between women as a source of strength, and the overtones of stigma and shame are ever present for Isabelle. Galzy's message and motives for depicting this inner turmoil are unclear: is it the case, as Milligan argues, that Marien is a mere vessel who serves only to allow Isabelle to project her desire for Gladys through a "legitimate" heterosexual pairing? Or is Isabelle overwhelmed by her first experiences of physical desire, and experimenting with potential partners? In any case, she drives her encounters with both of them, only to discover that Marien is serially unfaithful and that Gladys too seems to have been playing with her, leading to a deep sense of rejection. Discarded by Gladys and Marien, exiled from the community at Sèvres, she has no access (textual or physical) to the elite spaces of the *Académie des Femmes*. Everything seems tainted, as she laments that she will never forget Marien and Gladys, or be able to think of one without the other (YGH, p. 275). The queer superimposition of herself over the figure of Marien is now a heterosexual union which excludes her.

Queerly misaligned with both normative society and modernist sapphism, Isabelle is caught between a desire to look forward (to what? And where?) and to turn back (to what? And how?) This is rendered explicit in the opening of the novel, which echoes the queer temporal circularity of Lehmann's novel: the initial pages recount a scene that occurs several years later, for the 50th anniversary celebrations of the *École normale* (1931). There, Isabelle, and many other alumnae, almost all of whom seem to be working as teachers, listen to the current students singing Orpheus and Eurydice. The narration of this is interrupted just at the moment when Orpheus is leading his wife back to the world of the living, by the voice of one of Isabelle's former classmates, interpellating her by name (YGH, p. 14). Isabelle (Orpheus?), looks up, at her friend, at her past. The symbolism of this reference is deeply ambiguous: what kind of loss does Isabelle risk, in attending this anniversary? In "looking" backwards, is she provoking a traumatic encounter with events she has sought to repress and overcome?

Love, who evokes the story of Orpheus and Eurydice as emblematic of queer backwardness, suggests that we might read Orpheus' lament on losing his wife «as an effect of the particular losses suffered by queer historical subjects», and as an allegory of the historian who seeks to save queer figures from the hostile past, while they fade into shadow, unreachable.<sup>43</sup> Isabelle had already lost the objects of her desire before returning to Sèvres, and it is

<sup>42</sup> L. DOAN, «*Acts of Female Indecency*», cit., pp. 202-203.

<sup>43</sup> H. LOVE, *Feeling Backward*, cit., pp. 50-51.

not them whom she sees as she lifts her head; it is Solange, a friend who was not caught up in the emotional denouement that the reader will discover in the final pages of the novel. It is not Solange that Isabelle is seeking, but rather the shadowy wraiths of Gladys, Marien and herself, which are then reanimated for the reader in the course of the novel, only to fade, leaving Isabelle alone.

#### 4 CONFLUENCE

To bring these novels together, we draw now on Susan Lanser's concept of "confluence" – «the practice of exploring related phenomena that may share underlying causal connections». According to Lanser, «confluence allows us to study [...] genetically independent" instances in order to see whether they share a cultural deep logic».<sup>44</sup> She developed this approach in the field of sexuality studies to answer the frustrating problem of mapping the influence of queer texts in history. In this section, we trace some instances of confluence, and suggest the underlying logics that may bring them together.

One clear shared theme is the influence of negative sexological discourses of female homosexuality. Let us explore two examples. In Cambridge, Jennifer leaves Judith for Geraldine—described as a stereotypical "mannish" lesbian. One year later, Jennifer writes to Judith:

Why did you ever waste your time over me? I'm rotten and I always shall be. As you see I'm at home now but I shan't stay long. There are far too many raised eyebrows and disapproving chins about [...]. I always prophesied I'd come to a bad end, didn't I? I seemed to like nearly all the vices (DA, p. 289).

A similar awareness of vices surfaces towards the end of Galzy's novel, but in relation to a jumbled list of Isabelle's frame of reference: Baudelaire's damned women, the seven sorrows of the virgin, her own adolescent «impure thoughts», Freud and psychiatry (YGH, p. 274); she also laments the physical and psychological suffering caused by an awareness of her situation: «She felt a bitterness rising within her, it swelled in her throat, became suffocating [...] How long would this last? Would she live like this forever, with this weight in her chest? In this empty, sterile hell, set aside from the rest of the world?» (YGH, p. 285).

When comparing these citations, several recurring themes are immediately apparent: a sense of being rotten, born bad, destined to endure misery, and suffer punishment. Here we can see how pathologizing ideas about sexuality and desire, which travelled across Europe through translations of sexological texts, also travelled across contexts and languages in literature. The references to Freud and psychiatry in Galzy's novel make this link explicit, but also show how the stigmatization of queer desire was reinforced through medical, literary and religious texts.

There are also similarities in narrative structure. Each novel can, to some extent, be considered a queer revisitiation of the *Bildungsroman* as it tells the

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<sup>44</sup> SUSAN S. LANSER, *Comparatively Lesbian. Queer/Feminist Theory and the Sexuality of History*. The 2014 - 2015 Report on the State of the Discipline of Comparative Literature, url <https://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/entry/comparatively-lesbian-queerfeminist-theory-and-sexuality-history-o> (Accessed 6 April 2021)

story of a lonely girl who seeks companionship and sexual/emotional fulfilment with another young woman. Like the male heroes, whose journey to maturity involves leaving and then regaining the childhood home, Judith and Isabelle's trajectories are intellectual, psychological and geographic. Like other women protagonists of *Bildungsromane*, however, they «contest the notion that personal fulfilment is to be achieved as a consequence of one's successful integration into society».<sup>45</sup> Moreover, like other "coming out" *Bildungsromane*, they show «the centrality to modernity of sexual subjects per se».<sup>46</sup> Lehmann and Galzy's novels present protagonists whose journeys involve willingly transgressing the norms of sexuality and gender in various ways, and a sharp awareness of the penalties this may incur. Moreover, there is a sense in which both protagonists struggle against the negative consequences of their homoerotic relationships, rather than seeking to conform to the norms, or lament their outsider status in relation to dominant society, and their former social circles.

In terms of backward modernism, there is plenty of shame, isolation, self-hatred and stigma, and both novels narrate «painful negotiation[s] of the coming of modern homosexuality», infused with a sharp sense of «the corporeal and psychic costs of homophobia».<sup>47</sup> Judith and Isabelle experience loneliness and alienation, and are burdened by the impossibility of speaking out about their feelings, either to themselves or to the people they desire. This inability to articulate their emotions has potentially devastating consequences.

However, there also moments of queer affirmation, where characters refuse to be cowed by their situations and the judgements of others. It is vital to consider which characters speak the negative statements, and whether they are the last word on the subject. In *Dusty Answer*, it is *Jennifer* who categorises herself as «rotten», not the protagonist Judith. She is saddened by the loss of Jennifer but not overtly ashamed of her feelings. Therefore, while Jennifer decides to finally escape by leaving Britain for France, Judith has a different experience:

She was going home again to be *alone*. She smiled, thinking suddenly that she might be considered an object for *pity*, so complete was her *loneliness* [...] Yet it was impossible to feel *self-pity*. Perhaps it was the train's [...] motion [...] that benumbed the mind, soothing it to a state that seemed like *happiness*. [...] She was a person whose whole past made one great circle, completed now and ready to be discarded. Soon she must begin to think: what next? But not quite yet. (DA, pp. 302-303, our emphasis)

In this case, loneliness does not lead to despair; and the journey back home is not the sign of tragic social failure but rather, in Jack Halberstam's terms, a more promising form of "queer failure" that offers an alternative future to

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<sup>45</sup> MAROULA JOANNOU, *The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century*, in SARAH GRAHAM (ed.), *A History of the Bildungsroman*, cit., pp. 200-216, p. 215.

<sup>46</sup> M. MILLER, *Lesbian, Gay and Trans Bildungsromane*, cit., pp. 239-266, p. 266.

<sup>47</sup> H. LOVE, *Feeling Backward*, cit., p. 4.

heteronormative models.<sup>48</sup> Judith has experienced the difficult transition from childhood towards maturity and – from the viewpoint of the *Bildungsroman* – she has completed a phase and is now ready to look forward.

In a similar way, Galzy's protagonist, Isabelle, feels cast out and unable to breathe; however, soon afterwards, she gazes at her face reflected in a train window, and is surprised by what she sees:

It was her face, but so transformed that she couldn't take her eyes off it [...] she leant into herself, deeper than she had ever been able to before, further, beyond all turmoil, and there discovered a secret and sure witness, a soul within herself that was untouched by all her disordered experiences, which would give her the faith to keep on living. (YGH, p. 286)

In keeping with the ambiguous elements in the novel, it is not clear whether this is a vision of a pre-existing self, which will allow Isabelle to effectively reset her life in line with normality, or whether her changed face signals how much she has developed as a result of her experiences, and she will survive the noisy, passing scandal of the current moment thanks to her newly strengthened inner self.

Strikingly, both Galzy's and Lehmann's novels end with the protagonists staring at their reflections in a train window, as they travel back to their childhood home alone. While we have not yet managed to trace any definitive line of intertextual influence between these novels, it is certainly possible that Galzy read Lehmann's novel either in English or in the French translation.

As regards the unravelling of the term "lesbian", this occurs most strongly in relation to the bisexual aspects of the complex love triangles analysed above. Judith desires and has physical relationships with both men and women, as does Isabelle. Indeed, while Isabelle may be using Marien as a male screen on which to project herself in her fantasies about Gladys, she continues to desire both of them, wishing at the end of the novel that «Gladys would be hers again, and perhaps she could hope once more to attain (*atteindre*) Marien» (YGH, p. 280). The verb *atteindre*, with its multiple connotations of reaching, catching, attaining, finding and creating, leaves open the possibility that Isabelle derives pleasure both from physical intimacy with Marien and from identifying as him in her fantasies. In this scenario, he may be more than simply a screen for heterosexual substitution; rather Isabelle seems to want both Gladys and Marien together. Thus, neither Isabelle nor Judith are seeking to have relationships exclusively with women, and there is a queer edge to Isabelle's desire.

Both protagonists also encounter other queer individuals: Judith socialises with more queer women than Isabelle and also comes to terms with her jealousy of Roddy's relationship with Tony Baring; however, Isabelle's eyes are also opened to the fact that she is not the only young woman to have feelings for Miss Benz, when Suzanne reveals that she too was subject to Gladys's charms before becoming engaged to Marien (YGH, p. 178). There is an incestuous dimension to both narratives which seems almost to normalize partner-swapping even as it causes pain; this might reflect Lehmann's knowledge of the Bloomsbury group and Galzy's affiliation to Barney's circle of partner-

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<sup>48</sup> See JACK HALBERSTAM, *The Queer Art of Failure*, New York, Duke UP, 2011.

swapping Sapphists.<sup>49</sup> What is clear is that both protagonists are far removed from the model of heterosexual monogamy and marriage—which was the aspiration and ultimate achievement of the protagonist of Reval's novel about Sèvres (1900), the closest predecessor to Galzy's novel.

The confluence of assumed social values and norms in these novels, and the resonances between the transgressions of these, are striking. Predominantly negative sexological discourses on queer desire constitute one 'underlying causal connection' and 'cultural deep logic' which these novels share. However, the moments of understated feminist, queer positive self-affirmation that Judith and Isabelle experience, which resonate so closely, go against the dominant socio-cultural norms. In their quiet ways, these novels share a logic which affirms that women can desire other women, experience queer desire (theirs, and of those around them) and not be broken by the experience; indeed, it seems on some level to strengthen them, and give them an additional inner resource. Isabelle and Judith's relationships may end and cause them sadness, but they have been able to live out their queer desires to some extent, and know of other women and men who have had similar experiences.

Finally, we can draw these texts together in relation to a further «cultural deep logic» that they share: the lasting impact of these homoerotic experiences on the protagonists. Rather than a passing phase, it is clear that, for better or worse, Judith and Isabelle are *irrevocably* changed by their relationships with other young women. Indeed, the feelings they evoke have a *profound* effect on the protagonists for the rest of their lives, not just within all girls' institutions. Thus, these novels insist on the transformative effect of homoerotic desire.

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<sup>49</sup> J. WAELTI-WALTERS, *Damned Women*, cit., p. 73.

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### PAROLE CHIAVE

Backward Modernism; Cross-Cultural Studies; Queer Studies; Rosamond Lehmann; Jeanne Galzy



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