



Foster, Jeannette Howard (1895-1981)

by Caryn E. Neumann

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Jeannette Foster, an author, poet, translator, and librarian, established the groundwork for research into lesbian literature with *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1956). She deserves recognition as one of the foremothers of queer studies.

Born November 3, 1895 in Oak Park, Illinois, Foster entered the University of Chicago at the age of 17. She transferred to Rockford College in Rockford, Illinois to earn an A.B. in chemistry and engineering in 1918. She then returned to the University of Chicago and earned an M.A. in English and American literature in 1922.

While at Rockford, Foster came up with the idea for *Sex Variant Women in Literature*. She had served on a student council that, in a meeting without the younger members, voted to dismiss two girls from a college dormitory unless they altered their habits. The innocent Foster could not understand why the girls would lock themselves into their room together and why they became the targets of such severe discipline.

Like any good student, Foster went to the library for further research. She discovered Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, as well as other scientific and factual works. Many of these books made references to works of literature and poetry, which excited Foster's passionate interest. Her scope of research expanded. She subsequently devoted years to the study of emotional attraction between women in literature.

Foster spent most of her working life in academia. She taught literature and creative writing at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota for about ten years after college. Deciding to switch careers, she obtained an M.A. degree in library science from Emory University in Atlanta in 1932 and a Ph.D. in library science from the University of Chicago in 1935.

Foster found a job as a science librarian at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. A position as professor of library science then took her to Drexel Institute in Philadelphia in 1937. From 1948 to 1952, she worked as Alfred Kinsey's first librarian at the Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University. She moved frequently from job to job until her retirement in the 1960s.

Foster published both fiction and nonfiction in a variety of publications, sometimes using the pseudonyms Jan Addison, Hilary Farr, and Abigail Sanford. Many of her pieces appeared in *The Ladder*, the publication of the homophile organization, Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), in which she was a member.

In 1955, after years of indefatigable research, Foster finished *Sex Variant Women in Literature*. A book of 400 pages, it critically examines the appearance of "variant women" in 324 literary titles by authors from Sappho to Claire Morgan (a.k.a. Patricia Highsmith).

Writing the manuscript proved easier than finding a publisher. As a scholarly work, it was initially scheduled for publication at a university press, but the editor who accepted the book died before it was published.

His successor refused to honor the press's commitment to issue the work.

Knowing the futility of the gesture, Foster made no effort to send the manuscript to a commercial trade publisher. She used her own finances to publish the book with a vanity publisher, Vantage Press. It received only one review, a negative one, in a psychology publication.

The only money Foster received from the initial publication of *Sex Variant Women* came in a check for \$240 when a secondhand book dealer bought the remaining 2,400 copies from the original printing of 3,500. The book was later reissued by Diana Press in 1975 and by Naiad Press in 1985.

Distinguished both for its critical insights and for the quality of its research, *Sex Variant Women* has had a major influence on studies of lesbian literature. Not only is it a standard citation in critical studies, but in many ways it helped define a canon of lesbian literature.

Foster's translation of Renée Vivien's *A Woman Appeared to Me* was published by Naiad Press in 1976. A collection of Foster's poetry also appeared in 1976 in *Two Women: The Poetry of Valerie Taylor and Jeannette Foster*, which was reissued in 1991 as *Two Women Revisited: The Poetry of Valerie Taylor and Jeannette Foster*.

In an effort to protect her friends, Foster never disclosed much about her private life. She did maintain friendships with such prominent lesbian literary figures as May Sarton, Janet Flanner, and Mary Renault.

Foster's most significant emotional attachment was her long-time romantic relationship with Linwood College professor Hazel Tolliver. In retirement, she and Tolliver shared a Pocohantas, Arkansas home with the head of Linwood's physical education department, Dorothy Ross.

After some years of poor health, Foster died July 26, 1981 in Pocohantas.

Sex Variant Women in Literature is a pioneering effort that has influenced almost every subsequent scholar of lesbian literature. Its publication made Foster one of the founding mothers of lesbian studies.

Foster's manuscripts were donated by Barbara Grier and Donna McBride of Naiad Press to the San Francisco Public Library's Gay and Lesbian Center.

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Caryn E. Neumann is a doctoral candidate in Women's History at Ohio State University. A past managing editor of the *Journal of Women's History*, her essays have appeared in the *Dictionary of American History* and *Notable American Women*, among other places.