

Vassar College

Digital Window @ Vassar

Senior Capstone Projects

2021

Perversion, Inversion, and Subversion: An Exploration of Intimacy in College Girl Fiction

Hannah Hildebolt
Vassar College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone

Recommended Citation

Hildebolt, Hannah, "Perversion, Inversion, and Subversion: An Exploration of Intimacy in College Girl Fiction" (2021). *Senior Capstone Projects*. 1124.
https://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone/1124

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Window @ Vassar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital Window @ Vassar. For more information, please contact library_thesis@vassar.edu.

Perversion, Inversion, and Subversion: An Exploration of Intimacy in College Girl Fiction

by Hannah Hildebolt

Tutor: Dr. Hiram Perez

Spring Semester 2021 (B-Term)

Acknowledgements

This thesis could not have been written without so many people. So, so many people. First, I have to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Hiram Perez, for agreeing to advise such an obscure and strange thesis, and for letting me constantly talk about how gay I am. But really, thank you so much for all of your help and kindness. You've been an amazing advisor and a wonderful professor. I meant it when I said I'd bother you for the rest of my life.

My thanks also goes to my major advisor, Professor Zlotnick. Thank you for encouraging me to write this when it was nothing more than a seed of an idea, and for everything else. This thesis would not be half what it is without your research methods class.

Of course, endless thanks to my family—my mom, my dad, my brother, and my Halmonie. Thanks for letting me ramble about this while we were trapped at home in quarantine. I love you.

To Miranda: I love you. Thank you so much for always being there when I needed you most. To Ella, Nika, Lena, Frank, Abrianna, Rui, Matisse, Jo, ZB, Max, Skylar, Kim, Bea, Farhia, Charlie, Léa, and all of my other wonderful, amazing, supportive friends: What would I do without you? This thesis truly, truly would not exist without your interest, your feedback, your encouragement, your support. You are everything to me.

Thanks so much to Vassar's amazing team of research librarians, but in particular Gretchen Lieb and Laura Streett, who have indulged my questions and requests time and time again. Thanks to Marianne Hansen in Bryn Mawr's archives. Thanks also to Dr. Christianne Gadd for her encouragement and resources over email.

And thanks so much to Vassar's amazing English department and the wider Vassar community. I miss you more than I can say.

Introduction: Intimacy and Women's Colleges Away From Intimacy and Women's Colleges

This thesis was planted as a seed in my mind when I was a Vassar sophomore. I was doing a project on “smashing,” or female intimacy at women’s colleges, for Professor Merrill’s American history class. There was something absolutely amazing at the core of this piece of hidden queer history, and I was mesmerized by everything I learned. I became fully enthralled with the concept of smashing over the course of that project—I didn’t stop talking about it for the next year. When it came time to pick a topic for my thesis, I knew I wanted to involve smashing somehow. Then, I remembered that I hadn’t had a chance to explore college girl fiction as much as I’d wanted to, because I had been so busy with the more historical side of things. What about an exploration of smashing within the genre of college girl fiction?

Soon after I brought this idea to my major advisor, COVID-19 shut the world down. Stuck in my childhood home for the summer with nothing to do, I decided that there was no time like the present to begin work on my thesis. I read college girl novels, emailed archivists, and devoured the few books and articles I could get my hands on. I found myself drawn to Kathleen Millay’s 1929 *Against the Wall* in particular, and I read it more than once. There was something so bizarrely fascinating about its clear disdain for women’s colleges, when all of the other college girl fiction I had read overflowed with praise. The genre was so obscure, and it deserved further study. In addition it was clear to me that not enough people had read Kathleen Millay’s novel, and I wanted to make a case for why it should be considered different and important from the rest of the genre. So I narrowed my focus down: I wanted to write something about why this book was so unusual. In order to do that, I needed some points of comparison, so I picked two earlier run-of-the-mill college girl fiction books of which I was particularly fond—Margaret

Warde's 1905 novel *Betty Wales, Sophomore* and Julia Schwartz's *Elinor's College Career*. They serve as representatives of the genre in its most normative form, perfect contrasts to the bizarre and wonderful *Against the Wall*.

However, *Against the Wall* is unusual in a hundred thousand different ways. It is pretty much an inversion of "normal" earlier college girl fiction, not only in how it treats smashing, but also in how it treats gender, class, social life, and so many other aspects of women's colleges. I couldn't write about all of them. At first, I thought I'd only write about how the novel treated smashing, but I realized quickly that I couldn't write about that without writing about heterosexuality, too. In its final form, this thesis is an exploration of how and why intimacy is portrayed differently in *Against the Wall* than it is in the novel's predecessors. I have rooted this exploration in historical context, because my ultimate goal is to show how shifting historical circumstances shifted the ways that both homoerotic and heterosexual intimacy is portrayed in college girl fiction.

I have always been fascinated by physical and emotional intimacy in an academic sense, and it's a very "me" subject to have centered my thesis on. The same is true for school settings, especially that of the college. It would make sense under normal circumstances for me to have written this thesis, but it took on new meaning because I wrote it this year, as a remote student. I could have been at Vassar, in the very environment about which I was writing, the environment which has shaped me so considerably. Instead, I was far from it—far from my professors and from my friends, craving the intimacies I had cultivated there. So in a way, this thesis was an exploration of my own experiences with intimacy at my own women's college, and all of the ways that I was missing it, and longed to return. It also asked me to grapple in no uncertain terms with the darker parts of the history of women's colleges in America—the links to misogyny,

eugenics, homophobia, and racism which still remain entrenched in these institutions today. I have tried to face these issues head on; I do not want to avoid them.

Writing this thesis was horribly difficult, and confusing, and complicated, and awful. It was also glorious, and a lifeline, and an obsession of mine. So please bear with me as I take a few obscure, dusty, almost pulp-y books and pull them to pieces, trying to understand how the circumstances surrounding them changed the relationships which appeared between their pages.

Literature Review: Searching for Sources on an Obscure Subject

When I knew for certain that I wanted to write my thesis on college girl fiction, I was already aware that there were not too many scholarly sources to guide my way. This became yet more true when I decided to center this thesis on one of the most obscure college girl books available, Kathleen Millay's *Against the Wall* (1929). What little published work there is on college girl fiction mostly does not mention this text, with only a couple of exceptions. Despite these obstacles, I remain determined to make use of the resources I can find. Writing a thesis on these rather obscure subjects has also offered me a unique opportunity to look for secondary sources beyond the literature which has been published by university presses and journals. Although there are a few truly excellent books in my bibliography which have been published by distinguished experts in the history of women's colleges and college girl fiction, there also exist slideshows, theses, and dissertations. Because my interest in queerness within college girl fiction has guided the creation of my thesis, it is the literature on these subjects which I review first, though there is less of it.

But these subjects are not the only ones that comprise my work. In order to gain a fuller understanding of why *Against the Wall* is such a subversive work within the genre of college girl

fiction, we must also do our best to understand the life of the author, Kathleen Millay—particularly her time at Vassar. Millay’s own experiences form the basis of the novel. Unfortunately, all of the secondary sources about Kathleen Millay’s life are biographical texts about her much more famous sister, Edna St. Vincent Millay. Therefore, all of my secondary sources only allow us to see Kathleen through the lens of Vincent’s life. This is part of what makes *Against the Wall* even more important as a text—Kathleen is the author, not Edna.

Humming in the background of the book, which rounds the picture of the novel out yet more fully, is the history of how queerness and sexuality developed during the Progressive Era. Therefore, a good part of my sources center around this subject, and I will provide an overview of what I was able to find and how it fits into this thesis. The context becomes yet more necessary when we consider lesbianism, specifically, because it intersects so heavily with widespread sociocultural misogyny and the rise of women’s colleges during this era.

Literature on College Girl Fiction

As I have said, there is not a great deal of published literature on college girl fiction. The gold standard of writing on the subject is Sherrie Inness’s *Intimate Communities: Representation and Social Transformation in Women’s College Fiction, 1895-1910*. The fact that there was not a lot of literature on college girl fiction did not escape Inness; she makes it clear in her introduction that this is a gap she looks to fill. The genre’s wide audience, she explains, means that it must have had a cultural impact, and this is why she thinks it worth exploring. In her book, Inness argues that college girl fiction was both subversive and conservative as a genre. She demonstrates that although college girl fiction showed its support for female autonomy and suffrage in certain ways, it largely upheld the existing social order in order to provide

reassurance to its wide audience. Inness also speculates a little as to who this audience might have been. The books seem to have been targeted towards teens who would one day attend college and perhaps women who once attended college. However, Inness explains that the books were far too popular for this narrow segment of the population to comprise the genre's readers. She argues that it was likely much of the country reading them to get a glimpse into college life.

Inness also takes us through the various plot devices and stock characters that make up the genre in order to clearly delineate its boundaries. To do this, she uses a number of the more popular college books of the time. These include *Elinor's College Career* by Julia Schwartz (1906), *Jane Allen of the Sub-Team* by Edith Bancroft (1917), the *Betty Wales* series (1904-1912), and *Across the Campus* by Caroline M. Fuller (1899). Inness uses these and other sources to find examples of the tropes she analyzes.

Shirley Marchalonis' book *College Girls* provides another essential source although not as well-cited as Inness's book. *College Girls* briefly analyzes *Against the Wall* in its chapter "Worlds Not So Green," which discusses why college girl fiction became less idealistic throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Marchalonis helps to sketch out a few of the different ways that *Against the Wall* and other books during this time period differed from earlier college girl fiction novels, although she does not go into as much detail as I do here. The most helpful feature of this study is how wide-ranging it is, covering the entire progression of the genre up till its dissolution. Inness covers many different tropes in many different texts, but Marchalonis reviews the change over time. This broad overview is helpful in orienting *Against the Wall* with regard to other college girl fiction books before it, like *Betty Wales*, *Sophomore* and *Elinor's College Career*, as well as the novel's contemporaries. Marchalonis even briefly mentions how the novel fits into

the concept of “smashing”—sometimes-erotic intimacy between women at women’s colleges—and lesbianism more generally in her chapter on love interests.

Decades earlier than either Inness or Marchalonis’ work, in 1962, John Lyons wrote *The College Novel* in America. This study mostly discusses male college novels rather than college girl fiction, but it does have a chapter on the history of college girl fiction. Like Marchalonis, Lyons mentions *Against the Wall* and discusses it for a few pages. He takes a completely negative view of Millay’s work, including the way it deals with queerness—Lyons wishes it were a good deal less queer, and perceives lesbianism at girls’ schools as an issue which needs to be fixed. He compares it to a few other novels about Vassar at the time, which seem to take a similarly critical view of the school, and disparages all of the books in question. This is fascinating because the book was published in the 60s, and although there are still a few decades between Millay’s writings and Lyons’, his opinion is much less even-handed than Marchalonis, who is writing thirty years later

As I said, not all of my sources were published works, and here we digress from those. Similar to Inness’s work of creating an overview of the genre, but in a different format, is Bryn Mawr College’s slideshow, entitled “The Best Thing in a Girl’s Life.” Created by the Bryn Mawr Special Collections team, this unique resource provides a quick overview of the most common aspects of college girl fiction. It does not make an argument about the books, but it summarizes the genre neatly. The slideshow’s bibliography is particularly useful, because it pulls direct examples and quotations of the genre’s tropes from the books themselves.

Beyond this, college girl fiction is mentioned offhandedly in books and articles about popular culture during the Victorian and Progressive eras, as well as in literature about school stories more widely. Undoubtedly, this is due to the fact that the genre is now extinct. It lives

mostly in the archives of the very schools which it looked to chronicle. Most of what I found out about college girl fiction is thanks to the books themselves; beyond that, I had Inness, Bryn Mawr, and Vassar's research librarians. It is a narrow field, which is one of the very reasons I was so drawn to it.

Literature on “Smashing”

There is slightly more literature on the “smashing” phenomenon with which this thesis is also concerned, but not very much more. The “Smashing” guide on Vassar College Library's website defines the term, and then adds, “Smashing has been an especially elusive and cryptic topic for researchers.” This proved true for me as a researcher, but not as true as it probably once was. The Bryn Mawr slideshow mentioned above discussed it, and Inness has an entire chapter devoted to “Mashes, Smashes, Crushes, and Raves” in *Intimate Communities*. These helped me to understand that college girl fiction as a genre was not explicit about erotic intimacy between women at women's colleges, and the books certainly did not define such relationships as queer or lesbian. Rather, smashes were used as a device which integrated a freshman into the college community. Inness explains that in college girl fiction, particularly intense smashes were portrayed unpleasant for everyone involved in the end. This implicitly warned readers to stay away from them.

Another important source for understanding smashing is a much older one, and not a scholarly one. Nancy Sahli's 1979 article “Smashing: Women's Relationships Before the Fall” in the magazine *Chrysalis* appears in almost every text on smashing. In this relatively short article, Sahli draws from the testimony of professors, visitors, and women's college alumnae in order to discuss the prevalence of smashing at these schools. Sahli's article is quite a bit older than many

of my other sources, and it was perhaps the first truly retrospective look at “smashing,” making it one of the first secondary sources to exist. Like those who came after her, such as Inness, Sahli explains how the medicalization of women’s sexualities eventually caused smashing to die out, which she believes is because it represented a threat to the established order.

Moving beyond published sources on smashing specifically, Christianne Gadd uses Inness in order to discuss female intimacy in college girl fiction for her MA thesis. She expands Inness’ framework beyond its original scope, to letters and diaries as well as the novels themselves, so that she might further explore the comparisons between historical reality and fiction. In this way, she is able to vividly trace both popular depictions of smashing and how it really manifested at women’s colleges, from the beginnings of the phenomenon to its end in the early 1900s. This is an extremely helpful expansion on the work Inness did to define the boundaries of college girl fiction, and fully integrates the genre into its historical context.

Literature on Queerness and Sexuality During the Progressive Era

“Smashing” does not exist in a vacuum, however. In order to understand where it comes from and why college girl fiction--including *Against the Wall*--treats it in the way it does,, we must understand the wider historical context of the study of and attitudes toward sexuality during the Progressive Era. Thankfully, there is plenty of published work on this subject. In particular, *Intimate Communities* weaves this wider historical context into its discussions about smashing and college fiction, as do many other writings, such as Gadd’s. As for scholarship that takes a broader view, Martha Vicinus’s article “Distance and Desire” and her book *Intimate Friends* both offer a wider ranging perspective on intimate female friendships throughout history, in and out of schools. She also takes time to explain the medicalization of the crush and the growing

suspicious behind smashing at women's colleges due to the rise of eugenics and sexology. The reason that Vicinus's work on this subject is particularly important is because she specifically sees these things as part of a lesbian historiography, which is not a given for many authors.

Vicinus places intimate female friendships into a specifically lesbian historiography, which was not typical before her text. I share that goal, which makes Vicinus's work essential to my own research.

Caroline Hasenyager's dissertation *Peopling the Cloister* (2004) includes a chapter on queerness in women's colleges, and traces the fear and suspicion these institutions inspired further back. She explains that women's colleges were connected to nunneries and other female-dominated institutions in the American Protestant mind. These institutions were mistrusted by the American public because of the lack of male authority present. Then, Hasenyager explains that this mistrust combined with fears of "race suicide" due to the eugenics movement, and fears of lesbianism due to the rise of sexology and medicalized discussion of "sexual inversion" as a type of disorder. This explicit tracing is necessary historical context for this thesis, and helps to place women's colleges precisely in the larger historical contexts of the eugenics and sexology movements which eventually led to smashing's disappearance. These are the conditions under which Kathleen Millay attended Vassar.

Literature on Kathleen Millay's Life

As I have already mentioned, there is no literature which focuses exclusively on Kathleen Millay's life or work. She is mentioned almost exclusively in biographies about her sister, Edna St. Vincent Millay. The most prominent and the most interesting among these is *Savage Beauty* by Nancy Milford. It contains quite a bit of information about the relationship between the two

sisters, which was turbulent and often spiked by jealousy—Vincent was the star of the family, and Kathleen was not. Competition between the sisters fostered bad feelings which lasted well into adulthood. The book also mentions that Kathleen Millay did not enjoy Vassar nearly as much as her sister did. This explains why *Against the Wall* takes such a negative view of Vassar and college life in general.

The lack of secondary sources around Kathleen Millay's life makes understanding *Against the Wall* more difficult and also more important. The only way Kathleen Millay's voice could be heard over her sister's was in her own writing, and this book is purely hers. *Against the Wall* speaks back bitterly to Vassar and to college girl fiction's sentimental portrayals of college life, if one chooses to listen.

Section I: Heterosexuality

In order to trace how intimate relationships in college girl fiction have changed over time, I begin by looking at heterosexual relationships within the genre. First, I will look at the absence of heterosexuality within *Betty Wales* and *Elinor's College Career*. Then, I will explore the much stronger presence of heterosexual relationships in *Against the Wall*. This will provide a good starting point for me to later look at how intimate relationships between women changed. Before I begin looking at heterosexuality in the earlier college girl fiction books, however, it is useful to have some historical context how sex and marriage functioned during the time that Schwartz and Warde were writing. Therefore, let us take a brief look at how American domestic life was changing as the world entered the 1900s.

The 1890s to the 1910s: How Eugenics and Sexology Impacted College Girl Fiction

During the turn of the 20th century, eugenics was rapidly gaining popularity with the American public. Eugenics is defined as “the practice or advocacy of controlled selective breeding of human populations (as by sterilization) to improve the population's genetic composition” (Merriam-Webster). Caroline Hasenyager explains that in early 20th century America, eugenics was specifically concerned with “the perceived superiority of both the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ race (native-born Protestants of British or otherwise northern European descent) and the culture, or ‘civilization,’ it had created” (161). Women’s colleges played a very specific role in furthering this ideology, Hasenyager writes. “It was vital, proponents argued, that Anglo-Saxon women marry and breed in sufficient numbers to ensure their continued hegemony, and college women—who were drawn overwhelmingly from the Anglo-Saxon elite—were not to be excused from this ‘duty’ to their race” (161). Despite this sentiment growing slowly stronger, women’s colleges had not yet come under a great deal of eugenicist fire at the time that Warde and Schwartz were writing. The Seven Sisters would come under further scrutiny later in the century, when eugenics reached the peak of its popularity. (This increased scrutiny greatly influenced *Against the Wall*, as I will discuss later in this section.) For Warde and Schwartz, however, eugenics was only gaining speed, and had not yet peaked. Women’s colleges did face some pushback: Hasenyager mentions that Clark University professor G. Stanley Hall was already speaking publicly in 1905 about the role that women’s colleges played in “race suicide” by leading women away from marriage, and he would remain one of their most vocal critics.

On the whole, however, women’s colleges were enjoying an extraordinarily positive reputation in the eyes of the American public at this time. Sherrie Inness writes in *Intimate Communities* that “Historians refer to the Progressive Era, particularly the years from 1880 to 1910, as the ‘golden age’ of the Northeastern women’s colleges.” Later in the same passage,

Inness quotes Bryn Mawr president M. Carey Thomas, who said in 1908, “the battle for the higher education of women’s colleges has been gloriously, and forever, won” (qtd. in Inness). Helen Horowitz concurs with this assessment of the period in *Alma Mater*. She says that “women’s colleges had a remarkably good press at the beginning of the twentieth century” (279). Then, Horowitz goes on to detail how magazine articles and other reports from Seven Sisters alumnae “surrounded the women colleges with a positive aura, contributing to their growing social acceptability” (279).

College girl fiction was one form of the writing Horowitz mentions, which helped to solidify women’s colleges reputation and defend the schools against eugenicist concerns. Novels such as *Betty Wales* and *Elinor’s College Career* portrayed the female college as a utopia full of happy girls, an image that did much to bolster the Seven Sisters’ image in the American popular press. The absence of men and marriage was vital to this image. Marchalonis explains this by writing that within these early novels, all ideas of men and marriage are “postponed until the unique experience of college is over.” Men appear only in the correct times and places—at dances, for brief visits—but always on the margins (139). “The stronger the sense of the unique and satisfying green world,” Marchalonis writes, “the more peripheral the role of men in it” (141). Men make the perfect fantasy version of the women’s college in college girl fiction a little less real; they present an intrusion into the rare and fascinating all-girl world. If men are present, what happens within the walls of the women’s college no longer remains a secret, so a college girl novel loses some of its appeal. Therefore, there was no reason that the college girl fiction of this time should be particularly concerned with men or marriage in general—it was to the audience’s benefit to keep the novels centered on the college girls, rather than their potential love interests.

One might wonder, too, about the “sexless” nature of the protagonists of *Elinor’s College Career* and *Betty Wales, Sophomore*, to borrow language from Marchalonis (146). It may not be surprising, exactly, that widely-read books targeted at teenagers from the very early 1900s are rather chaste, but given the sexual tone of many scenes I analyze in *Against the Wall*, it seems worth providing some historical context on this score, too. At the time that Warde and Schwartz’s books were written, women’s sexuality was not yet widely discussed. In fact, the mainstream opinion was that women did not really even have sex drives. In *The Moral Panics of Sexuality*, Sarah Stage explains the prevailing ideology at the time.

Throughout the nineteenth century medical doctors, clergymen, and most Americans agreed that “natural” women felt no sexual desire whatsoever...Men, it was agreed, felt lust and must be held in check; fortunately “true women” were up to the task because for them the desire for motherhood substituted for men’s “baser instincts.” While Havelock Ellis in the 1890s and Sigmund Freud in the early twentieth century refuted the passionless woman prototype, it proved remarkably durable in the first decades of the twentieth century” (157).

So the Victorian conception of the woman as a mostly sexless being was still in full swing by the time that Schwartz and Warde were writing. Although Freud and Ellis were exploring sexuality further, their work would not have an impact on college girl fiction or the American public until slightly later in the century, and I will write about this impact when we explore *Against the Wall*. But in the earliest 1900s, as I have said, the role of college girl fiction was mostly to reassure the American public that the femininity of the students at these colleges was protected by the administration and that nothing inappropriate or subversive was taking place. At this time, a sex scene in one of these novels would have stood in direct opposition to the genre’s mission. Instead, Schwartz and Warde wrote within college girl fiction’s conventions and left their protagonists practically asexual.

However, this does not mean that Betty Wales and Eleanor Offitt's futures as college graduates were free of men or marriage—and this, Marchalonis explains, is one of the keys to the prosperity and wide public acceptance of college girl fiction during this time. “For most of the early fiction, men belong to the future, but readers would find no evidence or suggestion that the women's colleges present any barrier to marriage and the conventional happy ending, if that is what the young women want” (146). This is another way in which early college girl fiction acts to reassure its readers at the time that nothing transgressive is occurring at women's colleges which might upset the American public's sensitivities. Though the main characters of *Betty Wales* and *Elinor's College Career* are not jumping into heterosexual relationships as soon as they enter college, they also do not express any intention of remaining unmarried after they graduate. As Marchalonis points out, “The women who have pushed aside men for the moment are not desiccated and bespectacled frumps reacting to their inability to attract a man. They are appealing, interesting young women who enjoy the concerts and dances to which men are invited” (140). Betty and Elinor are both beautiful, well-liked, sociable, and caring. It is also hinted that they are both upper class, as most girls at women's colleges were during this time period. These protagonists are the kinds of girls that eugenicists considered “of prime intelligence and racial stock,” which means that they most certainly wanted such girls to marry and reproduce (Horowitz 280). College girl fiction leaves their protagonists' futures wide open to marriage and motherhood, precisely in line with what eugenicists desired. This move soothed any fears that women's colleges were steering young white women away from marriage, but it also kept the “green world” of the all-girl environment intact.

The 1910s to 1930s: Eugenics and Sexology Gain Traction

So why, then, is the portrayal of heterosexual intimacy so different in *Against the Wall* than it is in the earlier college girl fiction books? As with Warde and Schwartz, understanding the wider historical context in which Millay was writing is essential. Radical changes in American sociomedical thought took place between the earlier college girl fiction books, in the first decade of the 1900s, and the time that *Against the Wall* was written at the very end of the 1920s. I will discuss the impact of the eugenics movement on women's colleges throughout these decades, in order to show how the movement's grip on these institutions tightened over time—a feeling which clearly informs how *Against the Wall* was written. I will also discuss the rise of sexology, which adds another dimension to our understanding on how the American public's perception of human sexuality changed over the decades in question.

As I explained earlier, eugenics was not yet in its heyday when Warde and Schwartz were writing. By the time that *Against the Wall* was published in the late 1920s, however, its popularity had intensified tenfold, and more and more Americans were pointing fingers at women's colleges as the reason for the downfall of the Anglo-Saxon race. Helen Horowitz explains why:

In the years around 1915, scholars came forward armed with statistics to prove that Mount Holyoke, Vassar, and Bryn Mawr graduates endangered the race. For Anglo-Saxons to survive, its women had to marry and produce three children...While defenders of the women's colleges at the time argued that critics exaggerated the number of unmarried and childless graduates, the numbers remained unassailable. Alumnae of the women's colleges did not marry at the rate of their non-college sisters (282).

Eugenicists saw women's colleges as a threat to the future of whiteness, and they had statistics to back their theories up. In the same passage, Horowitz specifically cites a study called "Education and Race Suicide" by Robert J. Sprague. The study found that only half of Mount Holyoke's graduates of 1890-92 had married, and had averaged less than two children. On top of this, it had also found that only a third of Wellesley and Bryn Mawr graduates had married, and had only

had a child each (Horowitz 282). Such statistics lent great fuel to the eugenicist fire, placing solid numbers behind what was once only an underlying fear. The aftermath of World War I also heightened these concerns, and the American public turned an increasing amount of attention onto the Seven Sisters. Horowitz explains that the war generated a “conservative groundswell” in the country, women’s colleges began to face attacks from all sides declaring that they were “pacifists and internationalists.” This eventually culminated in Calvin Coolidge himself criticizing the colleges as radical in 1921 (Horowitz 282).

As the country was becoming more interested in the domestic futures of the students at women’s colleges, the students themselves were also becoming more interested in their own sexual lives. Horowitz writes that “while a fictional graduate of 1900 turned away from a male friend to ‘Vassar’s all-sufficiency,’ her niece twenty-five years later would have found Vassar alone insufficient—indeed boring, perhaps even a bit threatening” (282). As Horowitz goes on to say, this was due to the rapidly growing field of sexology, or the study of human sexuality. Discussing the earlier college girl fiction books, I mentioned that such writers and thinkers as Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud were just entering the American consciousness. By the time *Against the Wall* was written, their writing had been fully absorbed into how the American public thought about and discussed sexuality. “Sophisticated Americans learned in the early twentieth century that women had active sexual natures, not latent ones,” explains Horowitz (282). This included young women headed off to college, eager to explore themselves, other people, and the world around them. As Horowitz says: “If they had sexual natures, then why did they waste themselves in a world without men?” (Horowitz 283). And so, by the 1920s, the world of the female college student was no longer one without men. The increased focus on women’s rights and suffrage during this decade meant that more and more women were attending college. It

became “the thing to do” among upper-middle class families (284). The consequence of this was that Seven Sisters attendees were of the same socioeconomic class as the young men attending Ivy Leagues, and it became appropriate for them to gather socially. As Horowitz puts it, “the all female-world of the girls’ college began to dissolve” as “students turned the energy that had once gone inward into the college community...outward towards men” (284).

I explained earlier that the “all-female world of the girls’ college” was important to maintaining the “green world” of college girl fiction, as Marchalonis calls it. It is no wonder, then, that Millay’s 1929 collegiate world differs so much from that of Schwartz or Warde in 1906. Marchalonis explains how this shift in historical circumstances impacted college girl fiction by saying, “By the 1920s and 1930s the few novels about women in college offer visions of a world in which that self-contained, magical women’s space either never existed or is so marginalized as to be nearly unattainable...Those set in the women’s colleges, unlike the earlier idyllic fiction...present what can only be described as ‘exposés’ of their institutions” (114).

Against the Wall is one of these exposés. In stark contrast to the earlier books which were written in the 1900s, Millay’s novel practically overflows with references to men, marriage, and sexuality. In fact, Marchalonis writes that “Millay rather labors the point that the college holds up marriage and children as the ultimate success” (156). She also adds that in contrast with other “turn-of-the-century novels” (of which *Betty Wales* is held up as one example, and *Elinor’s College Career* might be considered another), the fictional Matthew College seems “obsessed” with the idea that most graduates of women’s colleges did not marry. As I have already noted, however, eugenics had taken a harder and faster hold by the time that *Against the Wall* was written, which might explain why Millay felt the need to articulate this “obsession.” Unlike the writers of books such as *Betty Wales* and *Elinor’s College Career*, however, Millay does not

reassure her readers that the future of her collegiate protagonist is wide open to marriage, nor does she create a fictional college environment free of men or sexuality. Instead, Millay demonstrates the toll that the eugenicist mindset of the American public took on women whose ideas about sexual intimacy fell outside the popular discourse of this time period.

Exploring *Against the Wall's* Portrayal of Heterosexual Intimacy

The protagonist of *Against the Wall*, Rebecca, constantly grapples with her distaste for the idea of marriage and her lack of romantic passion towards men. One of the central problems of Millay's novel is that Rebecca desires more than marriage and babies, but few other people encourage her in these aspirations—including those at Matthew College. In contrast to the marriage-free, male-free college girl fiction novels that Schwartz and Warde were writing, the constant presence of male suitors and discussion of marriage and babies in *Against the Wall* is one part of understanding how discussions of sexuality and intimacy in college girl fiction changed due to the rising tide of eugenics. Instead of neatly and chastely avoiding any discussion of men as previous authors tended to do, Millay's novel explores its protagonist's complex, messy, and often contradictory feelings about men.

Unlike the lives of Betty Wales and Elinor Offitt, Becky Brewster's life is full of men. For the most part, she remains disinterested in any kind of future with any of the men who try to court her. The first and most salient among these is Sandy, a boy from Becky's hometown in Maine. He is on the scene before she even goes to Matthew. Sandy is well-liked and respected by the members of the town, who describe him as "a good hard-working boy enough," with "no foolishness about him" (286). He already wants to marry Becky—he wants her to stay home from college and be his wife while he runs his family's butcher shop. "I love you and I know it," he tells Becky. "And I want you so!—To marry me. Please believe me—I know what I'm talking

about—college is no place for a girl like you!” (93). Sandy repeats these pleas several times throughout the book, offering her several chances to leave her collegiate life for a heterosexual marriage-and-babies lifestyle. There are moments, too, when Becky comes close to giving in. Before she gets a chance to go to Matthew, she says to herself, “Oh, well, why not marry him—and have done with it. All this fretting! All this wanting to get away! Out of it! Why not end it once and for all? Saying ‘no’ all the time—it wasn’t any joke! Not for a girl” (31). Even when Becky does consider marrying Sandy, it isn’t because she really wants to; rather, it is only because it might be easier to give in than to resist.

Becky never does give in and marry Sandy, despite all of his pleas. This is because Becky is pushing back against something larger than Sandy as an individual, with his simple offer of marriage. Looking more closely at scenes where Sandy tries to be physically intimate with Becky shows that Becky is really resisting the eugencist pressure to get married and have sex with a man, in her role as a woman. These systems of sexuality and gender restrain her, and she longs for a life outside of marriage and reproduction. Sandy, with his masculine strength and his desperate wish to marry Becky, serves as one representation of the gender dynamics Becky longs to escape. This symbolism becomes particularly overt towards the beginning of the novel, when Sandy first asks Becky to marry him. He starts kissing her and touching her, but Becky does not want to be intimate with him. As she figures out how to get Sandy to stop, Becky’s inner monologue says:

Arms under his chin like that—always did the trick—“No, Sandy, not that. You really don’t want me that way, you know. Let me go—*please!*”—Another trick. Use ‘please’ and they’d let you go. Plead with them—make believe weep, even, as a last resort—and their gentlemanly instincts would come to the top—But tell them you didn’t want them—tell them to let you alone because you said so! Well, just try it and see where it got you! Only good girls should be let go. And good girls pleaded. Good girls wept. Good girls were the weaker sex—clinging vines—in need of protection—even from themselves if necessary (32).

Becky manipulates the gendered dynamics present in this scene in order to escape from having sex with Sandy without invoking his anger. During this scene, it is clear that Sandy would have had sex with Becky if she had not stopped him, even though she is completely repulsed by the idea. Becky knows that she cannot refuse him outright, or she risks not being taken seriously and forced to do so anyway. If she appears weak and feminine by crying, Sandy will slip into being her masculine protector, as is his prescribed societal role. Becky manipulates these dynamics in a completely self-aware fashion, narrating the process to herself from an outside perspective even as she redirects the situation. There is a difference between who Becky is and who she is perceived to be. She knows how to use her role as a “good girl”—a respectable girl—to help her avoid unwanted sex, especially because she knows it must lead to marriage.

This is not the only time that Sandy tries to force Becky to have sex with him, although Becky’s feelings about the situation are different in the following example. When she comes home during vacation later in the book, Sandy again asks Becky to marry him. Becky wants to have sex with him, but she does not want to marry him, and she can’t explain this to him. She discusses the situation in her: “Couldn’t have him unless she married him. Being a nice girl meant that. Being owned. Nice girls had to be owned. Had to belong to any man they wanted. Possessed. Tagged. And put away for safe keeping” (312). Becky, of course, does not want to be possessed, does not want to get married—she only desires Sandy sexually, but not in the long term.

Immediately after this, Sandy grabs Becky in a “crushing” grip, and she begins to suffocate, narrating, “Going—darkness—nothingness” (312). Then, Becky briefly seems to resurface for a moment, believing that Sandy is giving in to his sexual desires without needing to marry her, which is exactly what she wants. She says to herself, “Oh, never mind, don’t think.

Don't ask questions. Forget! He was forgetting—he wasn't caring—at last! At last he *wasn't caring!*” (313). Then, however, Sandy reiterates his desire for her to marry him, and then she narrates, “Beating! Beating! Hit him with your fists! Hit him! Hard! *Hard!* Fight him off! God damn him, anyway! Didn't he know anything? Beat him *off!*” (313). The mere mention of marriage is enough to evoke absolute revulsion in Becky. She shoves Sandy away and yells that he's “disgusting.” She “loathes” him for taking away her chance to have sex without getting married (313).

In both of these scenes, the first time Sandy asks Becky to marry him and the last, Becky is forced to physically extricate herself from his sexual come-ons because they are so loaded with the expectation that their relationship will eventually lead to marriage. Sandy's physical strength and his “crushing” grip are symbolic of the gender roles which constrain Becky, pressuring her until she comes close to passing out. Whether by subtly manipulating the emotional tenor situation or by using her fists, Becky does what she can to hold off marriage and make her own way. Becky is also entirely aware of the fact that her desires lie somewhere outside what is being offered to her, as is indicated by the running commentary of her thoughts as she moves through these scenes with Sandy. She resists the path most taken with a great deal of purpose.

Later, Becky discusses her deviant sexual attitude freely with one of the doctors at Matthew while she is having a medical examination. She and the doctor are discussing Matthew College's attitude towards marrying off its graduates. Becky says: “If a girl kisses a man before she's engaged, she's all ripe for perdition...Trying to get girls married off any way—to anybody! As long as it's in trousers! Anything! So long's they're really married! I think it's ghastly.” (338) The doctor tells Becky that such ideas lead to promiscuity, and ask if she wants to make love to

every man she sees. To this, Becky responds, “I shouldn’t say that, exactly. Even *I* don’t want *every* man I see. I pick and choose just a bit. But if I did want them all I don’t understand what good marrying me off into ignorance would do” (338). To this speech, the doctor says that this would not be the kind of girl that a man would want to marry. And Becky thinks to herself:

Ah! There we have it! The good old rub! Tra la, tra la, let’s all join hands and be the girls men want to marry! A thousand little girls men want to marry. A thousand little girls from school are we—tra la, tra lee, let’s try to be—not you, not me, but tee hee hee—the kind of girls men want us to be. Let’s hear and see—let’s live and dee—the kind of things men want us to be!

The mocking, singsong tone of this passage makes it clear that Becky is disgusted by what the doctor has said to her. The doctor, of course, represents the opinion of much of the American public at this time—a perfect symbol, given the medical overtone of much of the discussion about sex and reproduction during this time period. Such is the line that women’s colleges were attempting to push, or so Millay wants to show the reader.

Becky’s mocking little song about wanting to be the kind of girl a man wants to marry is particularly interesting in light of what we know about earlier college girl fiction. Elinor Offitt and Betty Wales are exactly the kind of girls about whom Becky makes fun. They represent “good” girls, “nice” girls, respectable girls who don’t want to “make love to every man they see,” as the doctor says. Becky’s sarcastically light tone makes fun of the flowery, idealistic college experience represented by popular depictions of women’s colleges, such as in the earlier books. Though the collegiate life might look nice on the surface, Becky’s singing implies, all it truly does is train women to please men.

When it comes to the fictional Matthew College, Becky’s analysis holds true. Sandy isn’t the only one who wants her to get married. All of Matthew College seems allied behind the project of getting Becky and every other college woman to marry. It seems that at every turn in

the book, a girl is either getting married or a faculty member is encouraging her to do so. Just a few examples of this theme are as follows:

- Becky's faculty advisor thinks that one of Becky's friends should marry a chauffeur who clearly only wants her for her money (378)
- A freshman Becky tutors gets married to her fiance and leaves Matthew (382)
- The doctor says that Becky should marry a man she has been on a few dates with and does not love (411)
- Becky is told that it is customary to tell the Head Warden about men the girls are seriously considering marrying (414)

To top off the list, Sandy himself gets married to a girl in their town after it becomes clear that Becky will not marry him (421).

As Marchalonis says, such frequent discussion of marriage would never have occurred in the earlier college girl novels. A character such as Sandy, who has so many overtly sexual interactions with Becky, would also never exist in the earlier books. These changes are clearly tied to the larger historical circumstances at play—the new knowledge of women's sexuality and the eugenicist desire for more college women to marry which were at the top of the American mind during this time period. As the sexless, all-female college falls apart in real life, so it did in the fiction. Unlike her predecessors in the genre, Millay was not invested in protecting the reputations of women's colleges, least of all Vassar. Instead of reassuring her readers about the chaste green world female college, she shows Becky kicking and screaming against the pressures of heterosexual marriage and men, surrounded by those who want to force her into conformity. However, heterosexual desire is only one kind of intimacy, and these new historical circumstances touched other kinds, too. Next, I will explore how the earlier college girl fiction,

and then *Against the Wall*, navigated homoerotic relationships between women. I hope that this will reveal yet another layer to how Millay illustrates the impact sexology and eugenics on college girl fiction.

Section II: Smashing and Female Intimacy

Now, I will move on to an exploration of how these three authors navigated homoerotic relationships between women in their books, and how they treated queerness more generally, especially in the case of *Against the Wall*. Again, I will begin by providing some necessary historical context for the earlier college girl fiction books, concerning how female homoeroticism was perceived at the time that the books were written. Then, I will move on to analyze a few scenes and relationships from both *Elinor's College Career* and *Betty Wales, Sophomore*, in order to give the reader a concrete understanding of how female homoeroticism appeared in these earlier novels. After that, I will move on to discuss how *Against the Wall* is different from these books, and I will provide historical context and analysis in the same pattern.

The 1890s to the 1910s: Smashing's Heyday

“Smashing” is defined by Vassar College’s Library Guide as “same-sex courting of classmates.” The guide also adds that smashing was “also used to describe particularly intimate or romantic relationships between two women,” and that “smashing has been an especially elusive and cryptic topic for researchers” (Vassar College Library). Helen Horowitz quotes a meeting of the Association of College Alumnae in 1882 which describes the phenomenon as “the extraordinary habit which [women’s college students] have of falling violently in love with one another, and suffering all the pangs of unrequited attachment, desperate jealousy &c, &c, with as

much energy as if one of them were a man” (65). Smashing manifested more as friendship in some cases and more as romance in others, but in both cases, these relationships were noted by the public at the time and by historians today for their intensity and their association with women’s colleges specifically. Such relationships mostly took place between older and younger students, but they happened between students and teachers, too. The younger student was typically seen as the aggressor, pursuing an older student or a teacher, who may or may not reciprocate those feelings.

Towards the beginning of the Progressive Era, Americans were mostly tolerant of close relationships between women, even when they seemed to verge beyond friendship. As Sherrie Inness explains, “the late Victorian public was tolerant of highly emotional, romantic relationships between women that sometimes continued throughout a lifetime.”¹ There was one caveat to this tolerance: these relationships could not have a sexual component. In order to ensure that girls were thoroughly aware of what constituted an appropriate intimate relationship, ladies’ magazines and other such publications wrote plenty about the dangers of intimate friendships which had grown too intense. For example, in a 1898 article for the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, writer Ruth Ashmore warns that kisses and embraces are “bad manners,” and suggests instead that “the strongest love between girl friends is not that which expresses itself in words and caresses” (Ashmore 20). The message is clear: Chaste friendship is fine, but anything which moves into physical affection is dangerous.

At the Seven Sisters, college authorities were highly aware of how popular “smashing” was, especially because the women at their schools had no men to divert their attentions from one another. Therefore, the colleges remained watchful in order to ensure that nothing the girls

¹ For a more complete history of these relationships, see *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* by Martha Vicinus (University of Chicago Press, 2004).

did together bordered on impropriety. Helen Horowitz discusses a speech from Vassar's President Raymond in 1872 which points to his concerns about "smashing." He was speaking to the Board of Trustees, trying to convince them to allow him to have twenty more rooms so that he might spread the students out a bit more. Some of his reasons for wanting the extra rooms, Horowitz explains, are "to break up injurious associations, to relieve deserving students from incongenial companions, to provide for those afflicted with delicate ailments" (66). Here, Raymond points gently towards concerns that "smashing" might end up being unhealthy, or "injurious," for the students themselves. He is careful to avoid overtly stating any concern about these relationships becoming sexual, so as not to even provoke such suspicions.

Students were much more accepting of these relationships than college administrators. Horowitz writes that "neither male nor female students brought to their mention of 'smashing' moral judgement" during this period of time. Instead, she writes that "acceptance and humor characterized student statements. While mentioned and joked about, the phenomenon was not underscored by students as particularly important" (68). To the students at women's colleges, then, smashing just constituted one part of a larger collegiate lifestyle. It was not something forbidden or dangerous, but a naturally occurring part of undergraduate life. The concerns about homosexuality and corruption which shadowed administrators such as President Raymond did not seem to surface in the college students' minds—those concerns would come later, as I will demonstrate when I discuss *Against the Wall*.

The college girl fiction during this time period takes the same lighthearted attitude towards smashing that the students do, treating it as a normal part of a college girl's life—as Inness says, the novels are "showing [smashing] as enhancing the quality of college student life

rather than diminishing it” (53). In so doing, the fiction departs from the party line of the college administration. However, Inness goes on to explain the caveat:

“The smash is regulated and controlled by the peer community, as well as by individual students who are encouraged by their fellows to police and discipline themselves if their crushes do not conform to the standards of behavior adopted by the community. An acceptable crush socializes outsiders into the community and spreads the hegemonic codes of the institution...Erotic desire and individual preference are subordinate to the propagation of the group’s values: they are mere incidentals that draw a woman into a smash and hence into the peer community” (53).

So what, exactly, are the “standards of behavior” which a crush must follow? In the Schwartz and Warde novels we look at most closely, the cases are quite clear. Both novels show us how a smash might go wrong and how it might go right, depending on the intensity of the smash and the people involved. In general, as Marchalonis says, the smash occurs “over distance, never between equals.” She adds, “It is one-sided; the adorer is younger, full of admiration, and respectful in her approach, while the admired one is older, more poised, and always gracious to the adorer” (150). This balance of intimacy and distance, combined with Inness’ point about how smashes are carefully regulated within the student community itself, leads to the clear-cut and carefully chosen examples of smashing which these authors use as teaching points. I will now take a closer look at these examples and see how they function in the earlier college girl fiction, so that I can provide a point of contrast for *Against the Wall*.

Smashing in Elinor’s College Career and *Betty Wales, Sophomore*

I will begin by taking a look at smashing within *Elinor’s College Career*, and then move on to *Betty Wales, Sophomore*. The Schwartz novel contains both a student-student smashing relationship as well as a teacher-student one, and they are both textbook demonstrations of how authors chose to navigate smashing during this turn of the century fiction. The Warde novel

contains one similarly clear-cut and useful demonstration of smashing between two students, and I will also analyze that relationship. These relationships will form a concrete point of comparison, so that I can demonstrate the ways that *Against the Wall* treats smashing entirely differently from its predecessors due to its historical circumstances.

The first relationship I will examine in *Elinor's College Career* is that between Ruth, one of the story's most prominent secondary characters, and an English teacher named Ms. Ewers. Ruth is somewhat estranged from the rest of the girls in her year. In part, this is because she is poor—a fact which continuously grates upon the protagonist, Elinor, so she mentions it often. Alongside being poor, Ruth is also a literary “genius,” and is known for her excellent essays and short stories. This makes her an oddity to the rest of the girls at the college, and they consider her strange for being so academically inclined. This is one of the things which draws Ruth to Ms. Ewers—Ms. Ewers appreciates what an excellent writer she is and encourages her to write more. Ruth's crush on the teacher quickly catches the attention of her friends. During the first dance at their fictional school, Elinor's roommate Myra watches Ms. Ewers approach Ruth and begin to speak to her. Myra says, “Elinor, just notice Ruth's eyes, will you? I didn't know she could care so much for anybody” (67). And indeed, Ruth doesn't care as much for anybody else, not for some time. This scene sets the groundwork for a particular attachment between Ruth and Ms. Ewers, one which only grows as time goes on.

This is not to last, however. As Inness explained, Ruth, as an outsider and an oddity, must be integrated into the college community. She cannot live only on the affections of this one teacher, not when that energy could go towards the creation of a social life amongst her peers. The attachment is not one which would have been considered healthy at the time. Therefore, the book must demonstrate the dangers of such an affection. Schwartz does this by having Ms.

Ewers leave right when Ruth is feeling best about the security of their attachment—she will be living close to Ms. Ewers, in a single room by her room. She imagines seeing her every day, and she is filled with joy at the prospect (217). Then, Ms. Ewers leaves, and Ruth falls into a dazed, broken shock. She says,

“I used to believe Ms. Ewers cared for me...but she went away without a thought of how—how I’d feel. She has written only once, and she speaks about her energy being limited. That means she does not wish to keep up a correspondence. That means she likes the other college better—and the other girls” (221)

In her mention of “the other girls,” Ruth’s heartbreak shines through clearly. These are more than the feelings of a student for a teacher. She believes that Ms. Ewers loves other students better than she loves her, and she is jealous. It is the exclusion of the attachment that she cared about, alongside its intellectual stimulation. Her friend Myra is left to respond, and her speech perfectly encapsulates the attitude that college girl fiction had towards smashing at this time. “A teacher who has seen hundreds of students come and go every year simply cannot care for all who admire her. She has got to hold herself indifferent...And so I think you ought to try to care most for your contemporaries...You have always been so much absorbed in Ms. Ewers that you neglected others. I’m quite sure that new friends will come to take her place” (221). Here, Myra gently attempts to redirect Ruth towards her classmates, who will offer attachments which bear more fruit. This way, Ruth will become integrated into the college community, rather than loving Ms. Ewers to the exclusion of everyone else.

Myra’s speech works, and Ruth quickly begins to care for her contemporaries. She finds great joy in her friendship with Elinor in particular. Although Elinor doesn’t return her attachment at first because she is averse to Ruth’s strangeness and poverty, she soon learns to love her. This attachment serves to make them both more suited to the world of the college: Ruth learns to love her contemporaries, and Elinor becomes less snobbish and condescending as a

person. Later in the book, Schwartz writes, “Ruth’s angles seem to have softened somehow since February, and a contented twinkle gleamed oftener in her eyes. It was pleasant to care for her ‘contemporaries,’ and to have them care for her. The knowledge that she had won affection was giving her greater self-confidence socially” (288). Schwartz is not subtle here: she draws a clear line between Ruth’s physical health and attitude improving and her transference of her crush over to Elinor from Ms. Ewers. She uses Myra’s language exactly, in order to make sure that the reader gets the point as fully as possible.

The case is the same for the student-student relationship in the Warde novel, *Betty Wales, Sophomore*. A freshman, Dora, has a crush on Eleanor, a sophomore and one of the main characters of the book. Dora feels so strongly for Eleanor that the other sophomores immediately take notice. Warde writes:

“Please don’t encourage the poor thing so,” laughed Katherine [at Eleanor]...“Why, yesterday morning at chapel I looked up in the gallery and there she [Dora] was in the front row, hanging over the railing as far as she dared, with her eyes glued to you. Some day she’ll fall off, and then think how you’ll feel, when the president talks about the terrible evils of the crush system, and stares straight at you” (36).

Here, the crush “system” is firmly acknowledged, and everyone in the conversation understands it immediately. It is even acknowledged that the faculty do not like it, the same as the surrounding historical context. Katharine, like a normal women’s college student at this time, finds some humor in the situation. However, there is a warning in what she says, too: she clearly means to warn Eleanor of the fact that Dora’s affection towards her is quite strong. She wants Eleanor to be mindful of such power, and not encourage the intimacy beyond the point of reason. Here, we can see the “regulation and control” which Inness spoke of. The community is at work, ensuring that things do not go beyond the bounds of what is proper.

In this novel, too, Eleanor and Dora's crush work to make college life both for better girls. One key scene involves a party Dora is throwing, where she has invited Eleanor and many of Eleanor's friends. Dora writes Eleanor a fortune which Eleanor reads aloud about how honest and kind she is. Eleanor has recently plagiarized a story from a magazine, and the other sophomores present are aware that this is the case, but Dora is not. An awkward moment ensues when one sophomore makes a joke about Eleanor's dishonesty after her fortune is read. Warde writes of Eleanor's feelings, "She had failed Dora Carlson, spoiled the party that the poor child had so counted on...Dora would never wholly trust her again...the friendship that Eleanor had meant should brighten her college course, would be turned to a bitter memory...She, Eleanor Watson, had made Dora waste her love on a cheat, a thief" (297). This is the most intense and genuine pang of remorse Eleanor has felt for her actions so far. It leads to her later getting help from a teacher and clearing her conscience. Only her affection for Dora could break her out of her own selfish tendencies and make her feel that she has truly done something wrong. If not for the crush and her strong attachment to Dora, she may never have really been regretful. Here, Warde demonstrates the moral evolution that can come from a true, "healthy" crush, one which falls in line with the standard behavior. In order to atone somewhat for what she has done, Eleanor later ends up lending some money to Dora so that she might be able to get a better room on campus. Affection, Warde seems to suggest, makes the women more generous to one another and encourages them to make their situations more equal. There are no "bad" crushes in Warde's novel; there is only this one which falls completely in line with the standard of this time.

Both of these novels provide textbook examples of what a "healthy" crush might have been considered at this time—smashing in its most "ideal" form, in the form which was most acceptable to the American public. In doing so, both of these authors neutralize any fears the

public may have had about smashing being unnatural or homosexual. Instead, they confine smashing to the realm of the platonic, without ever suggesting that there might be a hint of the sexual behind it. There is nothing frictional about a crush, so long as it falls within the accepted boundaries of one—in fact, smashing can even be healthy. Kathleen Millay's *Against the Wall* takes quite a different tack.

The 1920s to the 1930s: The Decline of Smashing

By the time that Kathleen Millay published *Against the Wall* in 1929, things had changed considerably in terms of the American public's tacit acceptance of the smashing phenomenon. The eugenics movement being in full swing meant that the spotlight was on women's colleges to ensure that their graduates got married, as I have discussed before. The idea that women might be more interested in each other rather than marriage and babies was seen as nothing less than a threat to the future of the white race. This was intensified by the fact that writings such as Havelock Ellis' *Sexual Inversion* had entered the public discourse, drawing more overt focus than ever to any form of homosexuality. Helen Horowitz explains how things changed during this time period in *Alma Mater*:

“Sexuality which did not require male potency to bring it into being could turn to women as well as men. This called into question female intimacy, which, as we have seen, was built into the original design of women's colleges. ‘Crushes’ came under open scrutiny, and writers in the periodical press called on mothers to monitor closely their daughter's behavior in college. One anonymous writer warned mothers that while nine-tenths of such friendships were innocent, one-tenth involved ‘moral degenerates.’ She described a ‘mutual crush’: the young women involved felt guilt and profound unhappiness because they knew that their relationship was ‘not legitimate.’ The word *lesbian* had not yet entered into common parlance, but young women and their mothers clearly understood the concept” (283)

I demonstrated in the last section of this thesis that there was a great deal of fear surrounding how men might ruin the purity and femininity of the students at women's colleges. Now, another

fear rises to the surface: the women might ruin each other, too. This, in part, was why women's colleges began to open their doors to male visitors, and why it became more socially acceptable for women at women's colleges to see men at nearby institutions. The increased freedom for heterosexual collegiate couples came with a noted increase in overt, publicly sanctioned, institutional homophobia.

Students were not the only ones to bear the public's accusations of lesbianism. Such claims ran rampant when it came to teachers, too. In *Sexual Inversion*, Havelock Ellis specifically mentions homosexual relationships which occur between female teachers and students as well as students and students (243). Such accusations towards teachers were common at the time, given that they were often both college graduates and unmarried—the exact type of woman that the American public associated with the female homosexual. In a 1928 article, Katharine Bement Davis conducted a widely-read study of 813 college graduates, asking them to discuss why they had not married. About half were teachers, which was common at the time. Several of the women who participated in the study listed “homosexual relations” as a reason for not having done so (Davis 463). Studies such as these threw the American public further into a panic over the state of women's colleges and the kinds of women who graduated from them, in addition to the concerns I have already mentioned about the students themselves. Therefore, there are very few primary records of smashing at this time, although there are plenty of warnings against it and concerns about homosexuality more generally.

So how did these changes impact college girl fiction? I have already discussed Marchalonis' explanation of how the “green world” of college girl fiction broke down at around this time, and that remains true and relevant here. I will add that the American public's fear of homosexuality and the increased turn towards overt heterosexuality was one of the underlying

reasons for this breakdown, as I wrote when discussing the green world's breakdown in the last section. All of this obviously impacted the way that the genre handled smashing and crushes. There is little literature on how the genre dealt with smashing during this time—probably because college girl fiction was growing less popular as the reputation of women's colleges began to dim, thanks to these new accusations of homosexuality. All that is left to do now is to step into *Against the Wall*, and explore exactly how Millay shows her readers the perversion of the green world.

Smashing in *Against the Wall*

Smashing is an entirely different beast in *Against the Wall* than it is in the earlier college girl fiction books, due to the historical circumstances I have just laid out. As I have already shown, heterosexual intimacy is strange and repulsive to Becky. Homoerotic intimacy is no less complicated. As we will see in considering the cases of two different intimate, smashing-esque relationships between students, any strong attachment between two students was seen as cause for suspicion from both administrators and students alike. Sexual intimacy, even homosexual intimacy, is discussed far more overtly in *Against the Wall* than in its predecessors, and the change is fascinating to witness. There are a couple of different scenes I want to explore which are indicative of the changing context.

The relationship between Becky and her classmate Rosalind is the first one I will discuss. Rosalind is one of Becky's classmates, and the two form a strong bond over their distaste for college life. When she first meets her, Becky thinks to herself that Rosalind is "pretty," "soft," and "sweet-looking," and she describes her smile like "the sudden sun on a cloudy day" (172). Rosalind even owns a lizard named "Sappho," to make it abundantly clear that there is

something homoerotic about her presence. The two girls are quite emotionally intimate with one another, and they sometimes touch each other in affectionate ways; however, their relationship never veers overtly past the platonic. This is probably due to the short duration of their relationship. The administration is unhappy with how close the two girls are, and almost as soon as they notice the intimacy present between the two, they do all they can to put a stop to it. When Rosalind faints, Becky takes her to the doctor's office, and the following scene ensues.

“Reaching down [Becky] brushed [Rosalind's] soft dark curls with her lips and saw the doctor watching her—strangely—fixedly...Becky refused to notice that penetrating stare” (205). Soon after the doctor takes notice of the physical affection between the two girls, Becky is called to her faculty advisor's house.

Mrs. Budd, her faculty advisor, says that “people have noticed that [Becky] spends quite a bit of time with one of the girls,” meaning Rosalind, although Mrs. Budd will not name her, saying that “it isn't really nice to use names” (217). Becky and Mrs. Budd go back and forth for a while longer, until Becky asks, “Don't you realize that trying to discourage certain things only makes them worse?...Will I be expelled, then, for preferring the society of one girl to another?” Mrs. Budd continuously reassures Becky that she only “doesn't want her to get talked about,” and that she “had her good at heart” (219). This sentiment, of course, falls in line with the watchful and penalizing attitude of the women's colleges administrations towards “smashing” during this time. Unlike the gentle guidance of the earlier college girl fiction books, which lead the girls away from intimate homoerotic attachment towards platonic ones, the college is presented here as forbidding. Becky is hurt, confused, and defiant in the face of this incursion into her privacy, and it's clear that Millay is endorsing her personal freedoms rather than the strict and bizarre norms of the college. Although Becky wants to defy the administration, her

friendship with Rosalind is brought to a sudden close when Rosalind becomes too sick to continue college at Matthew. The implication that the novel is making here is clear: the women's college is not the place for a woman with any sort of homosexual tendencies, and wherever they appear, they will be curtailed.

This is not the only place in the novel where the school makes an overt move to prevent its students from engaging in physical intimacy with one another. One of the key scenes in the book occurs when some of the girls are discussing a lecture from their "hygiene" class. A girl named Dumpty is explaining how it went, and the following scene ensues:

"Well, she was talking about—well, you know, friendships at college, and things like that. And she said they were alright—in their way, you know. But, well"—giggle giggle—and the rest took up the refrain—giggle giggle—"Then she said, well, and what do you suppose she meant by this? Becky—she said—well—"

"For God's sake, Dumpty! Don't be an idiot all your life! What *did* she say?"...

"She said it was alright to be friends, of course—but—to draw the chalk line at the bedroom door!" They held their breath in chorus. "Now what did Doctor Mary B. mean by *that*, Becky?" And Dumpty settled back and rested on her laurels" (347)

Becky doesn't believe that the girls don't know what the doctor meant at first, as though they are trying to draw the truth out of her because they've heard about her relationship with Rosalind.

The girls promise that they truly have no clue, and they genuinely want to know. Becky equivocates a little, saying that "there are only so many things you can do with geometric figures" (347). When pressed even further, she admits that the homosexuality they are discussing is "perverted," when one of the other girls calls them so (349). The conversation does not become more explicit than this, but this is so much more explicit than the previous college girl fiction has ever become. The school is, at last, admitting that it is possible for women to be physically intimate with each other, and taking explicit measures to stop such relationships from taking place. This combination of explication and ignorance is enough to confuse the girls—or, all of them except Becky—and make them curious, but not much more than that. They have still

never heard of lesbianism, and it seems clear that they'll never be able to fully think through how sex between women might physically take place, despite what Becky says about "geometric figures." Smashing is "perverted" now—something bizarre, unfathomable, both spoken and unspoken, known and unknown.

As I have demonstrated, the biggest shift between the earlier college girl fiction and *Against the Wall* is mostly one of tone. The earlier college girl fiction books treat intimacy between women as something natural, but which must be curtailed beyond a certain point. These novels offer gentle guidance and suggestions, rather than forcing the girls to feel one way or another. But once historical circumstances shifted enough that lesbianism and homosexuality were perceived by the American public as a threat against the eugenics-fueled survival of the white race, the college administration was presented entirely differently in what remained of college girl fiction. In *Against the Wall*, Kathleen Millay clearly does not want to follow in the footsteps of her predecessors Schwartz and Warde by creating a green world and giving the college a genial glow. Rather, she shows a world which is dark and twisted, with a strange attitude towards the very intimacy such institutions were once founded upon.

Conclusion

The only generalization which might be made about these three books together is that they are products of their times. *Elinor's College Career* and *Betty Wales, Sophomore* are reflective of the historical circumstances in which they were written. In a world which was tolerant of highly emotional relationships between women and saw even the existence of men in women's spaces as a threat to their purity, these books reassured their audiences about how intimacy occurred in spaces they could not surveil themselves. Life, they seemed to say, goes on

as normal behind the gilded walls of women's colleges. There is nothing to fear, and no suspicion necessary. Such novels both fueled the popularity of women's colleges and rode the wave themselves. *Against the Wall* is entirely different. It is reflective of a world which was highly suspicious of intimacy between two women, thanks to the extreme popularity of the eugenics movement. In this world, women are encouraged to marry and have babies, even within the hallowed space of the women's college.

There is a temptation to call books such as these "pulp trash," and to discard them simply because there are so many of them, and such a large portion of the country read them. Part of my intention in pulling out the larger themes of these novels was to push back against this sort of generalization. Gems like *Against the Wall* are likely hidden in many such genres, the ones which are discarded by academic as fluffy and formulaic. I would like to find more of them. It would be worth the search, if they are even half so fascinating, and tell us half so much about how popular literature is shaped by the world in which it is written.

Works Cited

Davis, Katharine Bement. "Why They Failed to Marry." *Harper's Monthly Magazine*; (Cover Title: *Harper's Magazine*); New York, N.Y., vol. 156, no. 934, Harper, Mar. 1928, pp. 460–69.

Ellis, Havelock. *Sexual Inversion*. F. A. Davis Company, 1901.

Gadd, Christianne, *Eclectic Affinities: Intimate Friendships in Women's Colleges*. 2005. Lehigh University, MA thesis.

https://www.academia.edu/5476202/Eclectic_affinities_intimate_friendships_in_womens_colleges_1880_1930.

Hansen, Marianne H. "The Best Thing in a Girl's Life: Early Women's Colleges in Fiction and Fact." *Bryn Mawr College Library Special Collections*, Feb. 2011, <http://bascom.brynmawr.edu/library/exhibits/BestThing/index.html>.

- Hasenyager, Caroline S. L., *Peopling the Cloister: Women's Colleges and the Worlds We've Made of Them*. 2013. The College of William and Mary, MA dissertation, pp. 155-207. ProQuest, <http://libproxy.vassar.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.vassar.edu/dissertations-theses/peopling-cloister-womens-colleges-worlds-weve/docview/1445379896/se-2?accountid=14824>.
- Inness, Sherrie A. *Intimate Communities: Representation and Social Transformation in Women's College Fiction, 1895-1910*. 1st ed., Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1995.
- Lyons, John. *The College Novel in America*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1962.
- Marchalonis, Shirley. *College Girls: A Century in Fiction*. Rutgers University Press, 1995.
- Milford, Nancy. *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. Random House, 2001.
- Millay, Kathleen. *Against the Wall*. Macaulay, 1929.
- Sahli, Nancy. "Smashing: Women's Relationships Before the Fall." *Chrysalis*, 8 (Summer 1979): 17-27.
- Schwartz, Julia. *Elinor's College Career*. Little, Brown, 1906.
- Vicinus, Martha. "Distance and Desire: English Boarding-School Friendships." *Signs*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1984, pp. 600-622. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3173613. Accessed 23 Feb. 2021.
- Vicinus, Martha. *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928*. 1st ed., The University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Warde, Margaret. *Betty Wales, Sophomore*. Penn, 1905.