

‘WE MUST DO THIS WELL IF WE DO IT AT ALL’: REPORTS ON THE FIRST WOMEN’S COLLEGE, GIRTON, CAMBRIDGE

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Abstract: This article examines two artefacts associated with the founding of the first women’s college, Girton College, Cambridge (1869). The first is a cartoon titled ‘St. Valentine’s Day Girton’ which ran in February 1876 in *Punch*. The second is a selection of archival student progress reports from ‘The Mistresses’ Termly Reports at Girton College, Cambridge (c. 1875-6). The founding of this seminal institution led to much speculation and debate about both the purpose and efficacy of education women at the university level. While *Punch* satirises the Girton Girls, the Mistresses’ Termly Reports reveal that their education was very demanding, as directed by Girton’s leading founder, Emily Davies. Additionally the young women saw the historic significance of their role and embraced the educational challenges presented to them. This article examines the representation and the reality of a Girton education.

During the mid-nineteenth century in Britain, Victorian social reformer Emily Davies believed in the liberating power of education, and she ‘led the battle for the admission of women into universities.’¹ Her work reforming governess training caused Davies to wonder what education would be available to girls after their time at college, and what future they might be qualified for if they chose not to marry; this inspired Davies with the idea of founding a female college at the university level. She approached Oxbridge to request that local exams be opened to girls, and while Oxford gave a firm ‘no’, Cambridge capitulated, and in 1865 they said yes.²

Davies teamed with Victorian reformers Barbara Bodichon and Lady Stanley to work to found the first women’s college in history.³ They realised that for women to be as fully liberated as men, and for them to be as employable and independent, they needed to be also as well educated. For Davies this meant learning Greek and Latin,⁴ and she fixed her sights on Cambridge as the place. Throughout the 1860s, these pioneers worked tirelessly to bring their vision of a college for women into fruition, and the object they had in view was ‘the ennobling, morally, intellectually and physically, of one half of humanity.’⁵ After much fundraising and lobbying, in 1869 they successfully opened the first women’s college at Hitchin, 35 miles from Cambridge. Three years later they would relocate to the outskirts of Cambridge, and this would become Girton College.⁶

From the first Davies’ desire was to establish a college of the highest repute. Bodichon wrote to Davies stating clearly, ‘We must do this well if we do it at all. My whole heart is in the idea.’⁷ Such an extraordinary event as the opening of Girton was bound to attract the attention of the London satirical magazine *Punch*, irrespective of the college’s merits. An early article by *Punch* editor Mark Lemon declared that *Punch* ‘was intended to raise a laugh’ and that it would be

¹ Barbara Caine, *Victorian Feminists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 3.

² Pam Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, 1827-1891: Feminist, Artist and Rebel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), p. 245.

³ Caine, p. 3.

⁴ ---, p. 65.

⁵ Barbara Stephen, *Emily Davies and Girton College*, (Westport, Conn.: Hyperion, 1976), p. 247.

⁶ ---, p. 282.

⁷ Hirsch, p. 247.

‘outspoken and irreverent in attacking the usual butts of Radicals.’⁸ One such group of radicals was the women’s social reformers, and Constance Rover notes that *Punch’s* prevailing attitude toward the higher education of women, like that of the general public, continued to be ambivalent.⁹ *Punch* did publish tributes to the girls’ successes in university exams,¹⁰ and then in subsequent issues reverted back to wistfully recalling the ‘good old days’ when women were women and men were men, such as even thirty years later in an 1895 issue when the fear of the New Woman is discussed:

...a new fear in my bosom vexes;
 Tomorrow there may be no sexes!
 Unless, as end to all pother,
 Each one in fact becomes the other.

Woman *was* woman, man *was* man,
 When Adam delved and Eve span
 Now he can’t dig and she won’t spin,
 Unless ‘tis tales all slang and sin!
 (Punch April 27, 1895:203)¹¹

While usually focused on amusing its primarily male readership, sometimes *Punch* simply reports on the academic achievements of Girtonians.¹²

⁸ Richard Geoffrey George Price, *A History of Punch* (London: Collins, 1957), 22.

⁹ Constance Rover, *The Punch Book of Women's Rights* (London: Hutchinson, 1967), p. 71.

¹⁰ ---, p. 69. Rover notes that ‘In 1890 Cambridge women were so successful that *Punch* termed it “The Ladies Year”.’

¹¹ Lyn Pykett, *The "Improper" Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 138.

¹² Caine, p. 239.



Figure 1. *Punch*, February 26, 1876, London, p. 73.

Image courtesy of Bodleian Library

Girton was only in its seventh year when *Punch's* most famous cartoonist,¹³ George du Maurier, published a full page cartoon that explores the efficacy, motives and the outcomes of the female pursuit of higher education at Girton. The cartoon heightens the colours of the most essential elements of a public debate, like the New Woman.¹⁴ Du Maurier likened his work to that ‘of an artist who has the enviable gift of so exquisitely distorting [people] that the sacrifice of truth is more than compensated by the side-splitting laughter the performance creates.’¹⁵ Like most *Punch* publications after Lemon’s editorship, R.G.G. Price notes that the treatment of drama was especially deft and lucid. Price states that ‘in many ways its politics were amateurish...The difference in tone is obvious when *Punch* turned to something it really understood, like the stage, and it is noticeable that the literary parodies were more life-like and penetrating than parodies of

¹³ Price, p. 93.

¹⁴ Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830-1890* (London: Longman, 1993), p. 189-94.

¹⁵ ---, p. 94.

political speeches.¹⁶ In this case the subject of the cartoon is the ‘Girton Girl’ and her Classical education, as exemplified through the use of the play *Antigone*. This girl was a new sort of social phenomenon, frightening traditional Victorian men and women alike with her newly accessible desire to be as educated as her male counterparts, for what purpose no one yet knew.¹⁷ Du Maurier, with his characteristically incisive eye for detail, portrays the Girton Girl as a cigarette smoking Fast Woman—a threat to education, men, and marriage, all in one fell swoop.¹⁸ Price notes how ‘the slightest evidence of feminine migration within the economic or the intellectual worlds roused the bachelor clubman in *Punch*.’¹⁹

In du Maurier’s cartoon, two young ladies at Girton are seen examining a Valentine that one of them has received from an admirer. The posture of the young ladies is telling, particularly the young lady on the left, hereafter referred to as Young Lady 1. Young Lady 1 is sitting on a table with her feet up on a chair in a masculine posture. Her knees are apart and she appears to be very unladylike. This is contrasted with her companion on the right, Young Lady 2, who stands erect with her hands demurely clasped behind her back. Young Lady 1 is smoking—a characteristic sign of a ‘Fast Woman’, that paragon of radicalism and emancipation.²⁰ This depiction, however, is unlikely to have been realistic as the girls were held to an incredibly strict standard of conduct. Emily Davies saw great gravity in the task of founding a college of historical importance and she was terrified lest any of the girls misstep. In a letter to Barbara Bodichon she states ‘there is not one as to whom there need be the least fear that she would do anything foolish.’²¹ In fact, at Hitchin College in 1871, the girls decided on their own to perform a Shakespearean play for their Headmistress and Miss Davies; this resulted in a heated debate as Miss Davies thought it completely inappropriate that girls were acting the parts of men.²² The young ladies of Girton, too, had to be on their best behavior at all times. Even if they could get hold of cigarettes they were unlikely to have anyplace to smoke them in.²³

Both young ladies are presented in fashionable dress, because *Punch* was always correct in the details of everyday life.²⁴ The Girton Girl stereotype was based on the Victorian concept of the ‘Fast Woman’, a woman that Established men could neither understand nor tame, but who presumably would have been attractive to Fast Men, and in this depiction du Maurier has epitomized this Victorian siren in the person of Young Lady 1. She is contrasted with Young Lady 2, who is presented as more proper and traditional, but it is interesting to note that it is radical Young Lady 1 who has received the Valentine. As typical Victorian Valentines were somewhat small and of a handheld size (see figure 2), perhaps this is a statement on which kind of men might be attracted to such a rebellious female, given that the Valentine in du Maurier’s cartoon is egregiously large, perhaps denoting an overcompensating bourgeois social climber, or perhaps implying that normal is not enough for a Girton Girl. In typical Victorian fashion the Valentine is unsigned, but the recipient knows quite well that it is from Gussie (short for

¹⁶ Price, p. 46.

¹⁷ Caine, p. 249. Caine notes that ‘the improvements in women’s education and the increasing choice of occupations open to them led to the possibility that middle-class women might choose a career and an independent life rather than marriage and a family.’

¹⁸ Sally Ledger, *The New Woman : Fiction and Feminism at the Fin De Siècle* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press; St. Martin’s Press, 1997), p. 96. Ledger discusses how the Girton Girl was particularly maligned by the British press and often depicted as ‘mannish, over-educated, humourless bores.’

¹⁹ ---, p. 109.

²⁰ ---, p. 96.

²¹ Stephen, *Emily Davies and Girton College*, p. 216

²² ---, p. 241.

²³ ---, p. 242. Stephen discusses the geographical location of the college and the leisure time of the students.

²⁴ Price, p. 79.

Augustus), who is from Oxford, which lends her a certain cachet for not only having a beau but in also having one who is from the rival school.



Figure 2: Victorian Valentine, circa 1908, 14x19 cm.

Image: Personal collection, S. Cerasuolo

Of greatest interest by far in the cartoon is the text below the image which refers to Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*. While the punctuation and stress marks of the Greek text are painstakingly perfect, indicating both the expectations of the male readership and the editorial standards of *Punch*, less certain in the cartoon is the young ladies' literary understanding of the text.

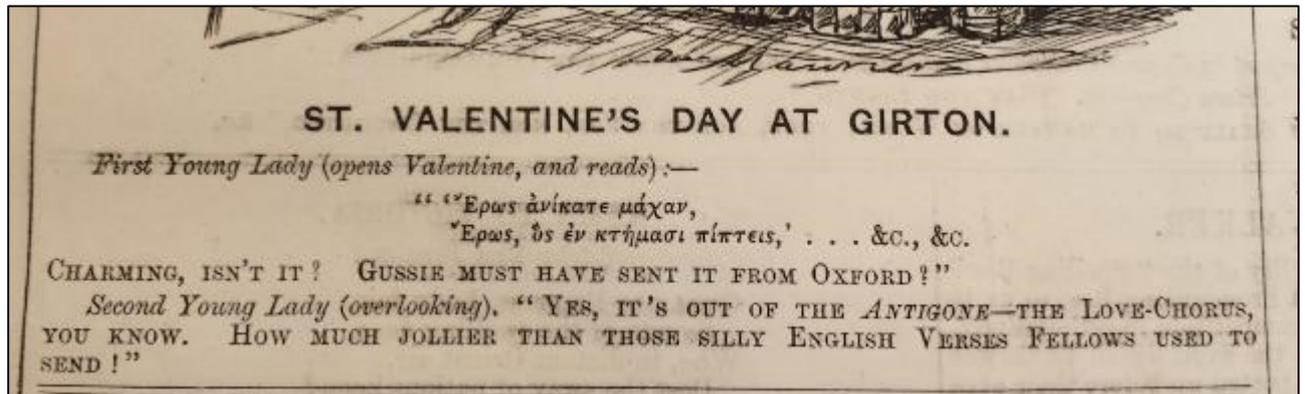


Figure 3: *Punch*, February 26, 1876, page 73.

Image courtesy of Bodleian Library

The first line of the Greek is the famous start of the third stasimon (main choral lyric) and translates, 'Love, invincible in battle;' the second line lends interesting context to the cartoon: 'Love, that swoops down on possessions.'²⁵ The first line is optimistic but does refer to love as a battle, which hints at the conflicting sexual forces at play in dealing with emancipated women. The second line could reveal a Victorian male fear of losing wealth if a man lost his heart to one of these new breed of proud Girton Girls, girls who might be jockeying to control more in life than just their own destinies. This is an odd choice of Valentine text from Gus, who could be interpreted as either a Fast Man or *Punch*'s 'unsexed man'—the only men who could be attracted to a Fast Woman.²⁶ Both young ladies can understand and declaim the Greek, and Young Lady 1 reads the whole of the strophe as indicated by the '&c., &c.', and Young Lady 2 understands her and replies with a didactic, 'It's from the love chorus, you know'—a subtle intimation that perhaps Young Lady 1 does not know at all, which is indicative of Young Lady 2's education. But what is particularly interesting is that they both use such words as 'charming', 'jolly' about a passage, taken out of context, from a tragedy. This brands them as callous or superficial or both; perhaps not sarcastic, though.

²⁵ Witt, Richard, email correspondence.

²⁶ Ledger, p. 96.

Similarly, Young Lady 2 refers to the 'love chorus' but there really is no love chorus in *Antigone*. In 1841 Mendelssohn had written incidental music (Op. 55) for the *Antigone*, in including this chorus and the play was much discussed by Hegel and others, so that YL2's deliberate use of the German word *Liebeschor* might denote her cultural awareness and good education.²⁷ Both her posture and her comments set her as a foil for YL1's cigarette and mannish posture.

The cartoon touches on several Victorian fears of educated women: will they really be learned, as in, are they mentally capable or is this just a waste of time and resources? What sort of men will please them once they are educated, or at least once they fancy themselves so? What will this do to the relations between the sexes, when women are as determined as *Antigone*? And perhaps most centrally, what will these educated women be fit to do when they leave university? Many of these questions can be answered, not by looking at *Punch*, but by looking within the workings of Girton College itself. The Mistress' Termly Reports from the Girton College Archives shed a great deal of light on the quality, depth and breadth of the education these young ladies received. These documents, handwritten chronicles kept by each Headmistress each term, detail the lectures attended by each girl, perhaps in reflection of the Victorian reporting practice derived from the school inspections of Matthew Arnold.²⁸ Girton sought to educate young women to achieve their full intellectual potential in a society where many of them could no longer rely on marriage as an economical survival plan (as women were often 'superfluous' in number).²⁹

Nowhere is this made more evident than in the geographical situation of Girton. The founders, Emily Davies, Barbara Bodichon and Lady Stanley, purposely set the college 35 miles away from the centre of Cambridge, so that the women could focus on their studies.³⁰ Emily Davies wrote of how 'in a College, as is well known, a student has the inestimable advantage of being free from distraction. This great boon—the power of being alone—is perhaps the most precious distinctive feature of college life.'³¹ This time to study, free from a busy daily routine in town of social calls and dinners, would allow these young women to develop their talents just as young men away at college had always been able to do.³² The founders also wanted the girls to be free from rumours of intrigues and romances. They felt that the founding of Girton was of momentous historical importance,³³ that they were setting an enormous precedent in the struggle for women's suffrage,³⁴ and that 'the smallest indiscretion on the part of any student would be disastrous.'³⁵ Thus they carefully chose an initial site, Hitchin, which was removed from Cambridge, but after three years when all went well and the girls proved to be very serious, and when arranging for greater tutorial coverage proved increasingly difficult for transport reasons, the founders moved the college to its permanent location at Girton, two miles from Cambridge city centre.³⁶

²⁷ Witt, Richard, email correspondence.

²⁸ Lilian Lewis Shiman, *Women and Leadership in Nineteenth Century England*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 85.

²⁹ ---, p. 73. In 1851 in England there were 400,000 more women than men, so marrying was not a viable economic survival plan for these women.

³⁰ Hirsch, p. 252.

³¹ M.C. Bradbrook, *'That Infidel Place': A Short History of Girton College, 1869-1969: With an Essay on the Collegiate University in the Modern World* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), p. 40.

³² Bradbrook, p. 39. 'She wanted for her students not only a room of their own, but a room not accessible to callers.'

³³ Stephen, *Emily Davies and Girton College*, p. 151.

³⁴ ---, p. 152.

³⁵ ---, p. 209.

³⁶ Hirsch, p. 252.

In the first year of the college, 18 young ladies took the entrance examination and, after much lobbying of sceptical parents,³⁷ five took up residence as the first entering class.³⁸ These five followed a course of study identical to that of their male Cambridge counterparts,³⁹ with Cambridge faculty traveling by train up to the College at Hitchin to give them private lectures. While the majority of Cambridge men were from the elite classes, these young female scholars came from both upper and middle-class backgrounds. Emily Davies noted in the original college programme that ‘During the last few years...an increasing desire has been manifested by young women of the upper and middle classes to carry on their education beyond the period usually assigned to it.’⁴⁰ Whatever their backgrounds, all of them sought to exercise their mental faculties, as evidenced by the hours spent each week attending lectures—where attendance was taken. The women initially studied Latin, Greek, and Mathematics, which Miss Davies valued above all other subjects as these were the most esteemed at Cambridge. Barbara Stephen notes that ‘all her influence was exerted in favour of Classics and the University course, and in the early years of the College, most of the students entered for the Tripos or Poll Degree examinations.’⁴¹ Claire Jones asserts that ‘the combination of mental and physical excellence that success in the Mathematics Tripos was believed to demonstrate, plus its acknowledged connections to elite masculinity, made the discipline a target for campaigners such as Emily Davies in their strategy to demonstrate women’s intellectual equality with men.’⁴² In her educational ideals, Davies was supported by the author George Eliot who believed in the mission of Girton and donated £50 toward the College’s foundation.⁴³

Soon after the founding of Girton, subjects such as Chemistry, Logic, Politics, and History were added to the programme and girls were more able to select their own courses of study (see figure 4). The students had the same lectures from the same professors as the Cambridge men (see figure 5), and Miss Davies wrote to Miss Bodichon saying, ‘I do not feel at all humble about our teachers...[they] are all of the first rank, and I do not feel inclined to look lower.’⁴⁴ The women also sat for the same examinations as their Cambridge male counterparts; they prepared and sat for the Tripos and Little Go exams (see figure 6), which most of them regularly passed though it meant grueling hours of study and students noted that Miss Davies was ‘apt to underestimate the drawbacks arising from want of previous preparation’ and any other Tripos than Mathematics and Classics was, to Miss Davies, ‘a soft option.’⁴⁵ In the first year that Girton students sat for the Little-go, all five of them passed in Classics and two passed in Mathematics; the other three passed one term later.⁴⁶ By all accounts the girls’ Cambridge education was challenging, as would be expected, but more importantly, they were capable of succeeding in it.

³⁷ Stephen, *Emily Davies and Girton College*, p. 211. ‘The schoolmistresses wanted to send their girls, and a good many girls wanted to come, but the College was considered “dangerous” by parents.’

³⁸ ---, p. 215

³⁹ Shiman, p. 21.

⁴⁰ Stephen, *Emily Davies and Girton College*, p. 152.

⁴¹ ---, p. 199.

⁴² Claire G. Jones, *Femininity, Mathematics and Science, 1880-1914* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 16.

⁴³ Stephen, *Emily Davies and Girton College*, p. 170.

⁴⁴ ---, p. 207.

⁴⁵ ---, p. 232.

⁴⁶ ---, p. 239.

Handwritten termly reports for the year 1875, listing students and their subjects. The reports are organized into columns for each student, with subjects and hours listed below their names. The subjects include Latin, Greek, Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, and History.

Student	Subjects
J. Baker	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. Chapman	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
W. Pritchard	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. Bellman	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. Pugsley	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. Mansell	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. Wallis	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. Brown	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. Harrison	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. Woodhead	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. K. Lygon	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. Green	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. Jackson	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. Tomkinson	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. Hill	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. Hunter	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. Wood	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. Lee	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. E. Egan	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. G. Jones	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr
J. Bach	Latin 1 hr, Greek 1 hr, Mathematics 1 hr

Figure 4: Mistress' Termly Reports, circa 1875, Girton College Archives, Cambridge. Image courtesy of The Mistress and Fellows, Girton College, Cambridge

Handwritten termly reports for the Lent Term 1876, detailing student progress and attendance. The reports are organized into columns for each student, with their progress in various subjects and attendance records listed below their names.

Miss Wallis gives great instruction to my student, who is not able to follow the lectures by herself, in algebra & Euclid 2 hrs a week & Greek & Latin grammar 1 hr a week.

1 student attend Professor Seely's lectures on chemistry at this university museum, 3 times a week. Professor Seely also asks these students papers & correct their answers once a week & sometimes afterwards.

1 student attend Professor Thompson's lectures on anatomy & physiology of man 3 times a week.

1 student attend in addition, Dr Foster's lectures on physiology twice a week & also a course given by Mr Palfrey & Mr Woodhead on morphology twice a week. After each of these lectures does practical microscope work in the private room set apart for the female students at the university museum.

1 student attend Professor Seely's lectures on history, given to women once a week.

3 students attend Professor Seely's university lectures on history, once a week.

1 student attend the lectures of the university museum weekly.

J. Mansell.
Girton College.
Feb 16 1876

Lent Term
1876

Figure 5: Mistress' Termly Reports, Lent Term 1876, Girton College Archives, Cambridge. Image courtesy of The Mistress and Fellows, Girton College, Cambridge

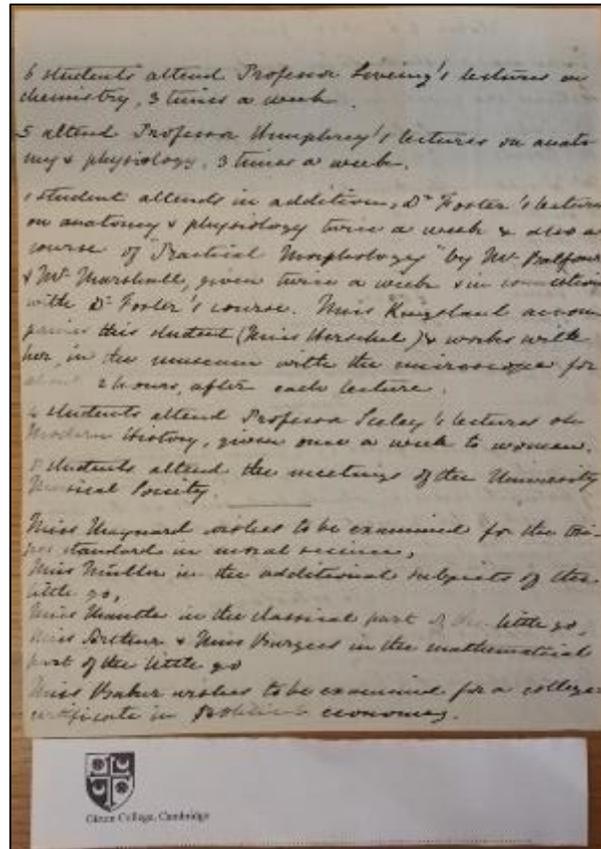


Figure 6: Mistress' Termly Reports, circa 1875, Girton College Archives, Cambridge.
Image courtesy of The Mistress and Fellows, Girton College, Cambridge

But just as du Maurier's career and line of jest could not last forever, neither could the public ignorance to what was really transpiring on the Girton campus. In only the second year of operation, 200 girls sat for the entrance exam and 12 of them took up residence at Hitchin.⁴⁷ The numbers continued to grow. As the Girton girls studied and passed their exams, they did so to acclaim. In 1880, Charlotte Scott of Girton was bracketed, the lone woman, as the eighth wrangler in the Mathematical Tripos placement list, and in 1888 Girton's Agenta Ramsay earned a first class placing in the Classical Tripos, when none of the young men sitting for the exam that year placed higher than a second.⁴⁸ As the women left Cambridge to find careers and make a difference in society (many of the earliest 'graduates' went on to be Mistresses of women's schools and colleges),⁴⁹ they also furthered the cause of women's education. Enrollment at Girton increased each year, and in less than ten years the original five students became 30.⁵⁰ The initial public perception of silly Girton Girls eventually succumbed to the reality that they were serious scholars undergoing a rigorous education. In spite of the academic successes of these early female founders and students, however, women would have to wait nearly 50 years, until 1948, for Cambridge to award them degrees on equal terms with men.⁵¹ At a time when men's education was in need of reform, when all too many undergraduates at Oxford and Cambridge neglected their studies in favour of social life, women experienced just the opposite and stepped into a demanding situation with no preparation. Regardless of the struggle required of these

⁴⁷ Stephen, *Emily Davies and Girton College*, p. 246.

⁴⁸ Rover, p. 69.

⁴⁹ Bradbrook, p. 48.

⁵⁰ Stephen, *Emily Davies and Girton College*, p. 219.

⁵¹ Rover, p.71.

female pioneers in higher education, Emily Davies was inspirational and by all accounts the Girton girls never considered giving up.

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