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### **Caroline Spurgeon (1869–1942) and the Institutionalisation of English Studies as a Scholarly Discipline**

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Through a brief survey of the career, connections, and major activities of what was the first female university professor in London, this essay singles out Caroline Spurgeon's role in her country's restructuring of English studies. She contributed to the renewal of academic English studies and she also secured the admission of British women to doctoral degrees at Oxford and Cambridge. The post-war crisis was a time of reconsideration of education (the elitism and male character of British educational system were especially attacked). The English committee, chaired by Sir Henry Newbolt, was, for instance, appointed to enquire into the position of English (language and literature) in England and to advise how to promote its study. The Report emphasized the international scope of English, the value of their literature and the importance of education and culture for everybody. Caroline Spurgeon was involved in various committees debating the subject. She was receptive to the pressure to reject the German form of philology and also had a strong curiosity about the cultural dimension of literature. Through her teachings, writings and activities inside her own department, she put her ideas of literary criticism into practice, and participated in the academic literary-critical renaissance of the 20s and early 30s. She was conjunctly an active militant in favour of women's eligibility to any degree and struggled for their academic career. She advocated more opportunities for foreign women in British Universities and hence contributed to the opening up of more for her fellow countrywomen. Her own appointment to a chair marked a turning point in the history of women's higher education.

Caroline Frances Eleanor Spurgeon (1869–1942) is a quite exceptional personality whose pioneer work and determined commitment are remembered in various circles. Her name is first of all that of a prominent female scholar involved in literary criticism. She started as medievalist, whose extensive and fundamental collection of five hundred years of Chaucer criticism is a landmark in Chaucerian studies (Spurgeon 1925). She subsequently devoted her research activities to mysticism, and she ended up as a specialist of Shakespeare (Spurgeon 1928), and in that field too her name is equated with a groundbreaking study about his imaginative vision and figurative language (Schabert 2005: 255–77). For those interested in the academic

careers of women, Caroline Spurgeon is known as the first female University professor in London, the second in England. She was actually the first female professor involved in English literature, and the first fully accepted in England at all (Haas 2005: 99–109). Lastly, one of Caroline Spurgeon's other major achievements was the co-founding of the International Federation of University Women (IFUW).

Of course, most of these activities are tightly linked, but in this essay I want to single out her role in the launching of new disciplines. In fact, it was a dual role: not only did she contribute to the institution of a new approach to the discipline of academic English studies but through her activities inside the IFUW she also secured the admission of British women to doctoral degrees at Oxford and Cambridge.

Born in 1869, Caroline Spurgeon had received a limited school education, which was, of course, the usual fate of girls, even if they belonged, as she did, to the upper middle class. When she was 24, she decided to attend classes for women at King's College, London, where she was noticed because of the high quality of her work.<sup>1</sup> She was then encouraged to read for the Oxford Honours School in English Language and Literature, where she passed the exams in 1899. Women were not eligible to read for an Oxford doctoral degree at that time and, not having taken the full course at Oxford, neither was she eligible for the Trinity College, Dublin degree, a backdoor into academia for women in the early 20th century. In 1901, she was appointed to the staff of Bedford College, University of London, where she was assistant lecturer in English until 1906. However, her future at the College was doubtful, even if one of her supporters, Dr Furnivall, wrote to her, as she reported, that she ought to have the professorship. Partly owing to the fact that without a doctorate degree her career was going to be handicapped,<sup>2</sup> she eventually matriculated at the Sorbonne, and in 1911 was awarded a doctorate from there with a very new work on Chaucer criticism (Dor 2007).<sup>3</sup> The following year, she received the first annual research fellowship of the British Federation of University Women. In 1913, thanks to her Sorbonne degree and other scholarly publications and activities, she was "then able to succeed in open competition against other applicants for the new university chair in English literature, tenable at Bedford College," (Haas 2005: 102) where she became head of Department; and in 1916, she was elected fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. In 1929 she retired from professional life and was made emeritus professor of English Literature. She settled in Arizona in 1936, and died six years later.

Up until 1912–13, no woman had been elected to any professorial chair in any British University, which means that Caroline Spurgeon's appointment marked a turning point in the history of women's higher education. To get a better sense of the significance of this milestone, it is useful to turn to what her friend Edith Morley wrote in her 1914 book: "she herself experienced mortifying career difficulties on

account of her sex at the newly established University College of Reading between 1907 and 1912. She was granted the title of 'Professor of English Language' in 1908, but only after a struggle which was extremely damaging to her self-esteem. The authorities were determined to appoint a man to the more prestigious Chair of English Literature, to whom she would very definitely be made subordinate" (Dyhouse 1995a: 471–2). In the chapter "Women at the Universities" of the collection of essays that she edited for the Fabian Society Women's Group, Morley commented bitterly that although "At all the new universities, men and women are nominally alike eligible for every teaching post, in practice, women are rarely if ever selected for the higher positions"(Spurgeon 1914: 15–6).

And indeed, Caroline Spurgeon's correspondence to her aunt mirrors her own struggles and anxieties: "No woman," she explained, "has ever been elected to a Professorial chair in any British University" (2 March 1913); "it is the chance of my life time. Even with all this I am very doubtful about getting it – though for once – I quite agree with you, that I ought to get it" (21 March 1913). In June 1913, she reports her interview with the Board ("most ghastly ordeal, a 1000 times worse than Paris"); we read that there were four men plus herself and that she seemed to master her nerves far better than her rivals (one even fainted): "the men looked ghastly – with their teeth chattering... It interests me that women have more control over themselves at a nervous crisis of that kind than men. Speaking generally, I believe this is so. They said the same thing both at Oxford with regard to my viva and at Paris."

Together with her more specific research and teaching activities, Caroline Spurgeon contributed very significantly to the restructuring of English studies. Not only did she write on the topic, not only did she put it into practice at Bedford, but she also took a major part in national reassessment committees of British education. In 1918, along with Rose Sidgwick, a lecturer in history at Birmingham University, she was part of the British educational mission sent to the United States. The team was commissioned to investigate the American University system and to knit closer official ties with transatlantic colleagues. The two women, who had been added to the male delegation at the last minute at the request of their guests, were so impressed by the opportunities offered to women in American Universities that they decided to add their own "Supplementary Report on Women's University Education," in which they made a number of important recommendations. Among other things, they highlighted the fact that American girls of "leisured and wealthy" classes generally attended college, in contrast to the British girls' "amateur and unsystematic education," and compared with, for example, Oxford and Cambridge, "where there is only space for a very small number of women, who are consequently restricted to those who intend to read for an Honours Degree." They recommended

H.M. Government to exert some pressure upon those two academic bastions of male privileges "to open up their degrees to women, as this has now become a matter of international as well as national importance."<sup>4</sup> During their visit to the USA, Sidgwick and Spurgeon were officially welcomed by the woman who was going to become the latter's life long friend. She was Virginia Gildersleeve, Dean of Barnard College in New York, who acted in her capacity as chair of the American International Committee of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae (i.e. ACA, created in the late 19th century to develop women's chances in higher education and work). After a long discussion on how to avoid a new world war, Caroline Spurgeon drew the historic conclusion "we should have...an international association of university women so that so that we at least shall have done all we can to prevent another such catastrophe" (Haas 2002: 224).

The foundation stone of the IFUW was laid, the project developed without delay, a couple of months later the British Federation of University Women invited the Collegiate Alumnae and Canadian representatives to London, and they officially launched the Association. The first conference was held at Bedford College in 1920, and Caroline Spurgeon was elected its first president. Her discovery of the New World had been particularly inspiring; it gave her interests a wider scope and enticed her to remedy the gender inequality of her country's academia. Independently of the foundation of the IFUW and her subsequent leading role in it, Caroline Spurgeon's mission in the US made her better aware of central difficulties that would arise in the organization of exchanges between women students and teachers. As she concluded in the additional report, it would indeed be very important and educative for women to travel more, and programs ought to be settled speedily. While arguing for free access to any form of training and research for American women, it became obvious to her that if British Universities became open to American women, they ought, of course, to be open to native women as well.

Women's admission to academic degrees pertains to a more general trend that has taken decades, with many ups and downs.<sup>5</sup> It is however interesting to observe that by advocating more opportunities for foreign women, Caroline Spurgeon contributed to the opening up of more opportunities for her own fellow countrywomen.<sup>6</sup> Networking – whether through the British Federation of University Women, or the IFUW – as well as female lobbying were not negligible aspects of the extension of women's eligibility to any degree. In fact, the post-war crisis was a time of reflection and reconsideration of education and its purposes, and she was involved in various committees debating the subject. In addition to the delegation sent to the US, the leading role of the Newbolt Committee should be highlighted in this context. It was precisely through her involvement in various projects and associations, especially the English Association, "a pressure group, which was founded in 1906 'to promote the due recognition of English as an essential element in the national education,'" (Baldick 1987: 93) that Caroline Spurgeon was

appointed to that Committee commissioned to investigate all aspects of the teaching of English in the country.

In order to gain a better insight into the climate of the Newbolt Committee's reflection, we have to start further back, at the time of the formative years of English literature as a scholarly discipline. As Franklin E. Court notes (Court 1988: 797–807), the appointment of Reverend Thomas Dale as the first designated Professorship in English Language and Literature in England (University College, London) in 1828 sheds lights on the social and historical significance of the institution of courses of English literature. Dale was supported by members of the council in favour of a "more pragmatic, hence more 'useful,' education than Oxford and Cambridge were willing to provide" (Court 1988: 797).

Among his major supporters was Henry Brougham, one of the University founders, deeply involved in the promotion of education; he was, e.g. the founder of the SDUK (Society for the diffusion of knowledge). Launching an English literature course at the University of London belonged to his campaign for literacy, especially among the labouring classes. His point was actually to encourage the populace's reading practices with the aim of making them more sensitive to political and social reform issues. Yet Dale had to resign after a very short term, and although some English professors still endeavoured to increase the popular appeal of the teaching of English literature, social and utilitarian principles were no longer considered important reasons for the inclusion of English literature in the university curriculum, if it had to be included at all.

Almost a century later, in her famous article "The Refashioning of English Education. A Lesson of the Great War," Caroline Spurgeon remarked that "it was only after nearly one hundred years of experiment in national education that it began to dawn on teachers and others interested in the subject, that all boys and girls, of whatever social class, ought to be trained in the elements of humane education, and that the indispensable preliminary to such an education for English children is a knowledge of how to use their own language, and an introduction to the riches of their own literature" (Spurgeon 1922: 55). At the end of the war, the elitism and male character of British educational system were violently attacked; "A large and eager democracy is knocking at the doors of our schools and universities and seeking entry, irrespective of sex or class, demanding that they also shall share in the advantages of this subtle, rather vaguely defined, and little-understood thing called education" (Spurgeon 1922: 57). Since it was undeniable that not all of them could be taught for between six and ten years on the old system of training in the ancient classical languages and civilizations, four committees were established by the government to investigate the state of teaching and to explore avenues of reorientation. The English committee, chaired by Sir Henry Newbolt, had been appointed to enquire into the position of English (language and literature) in

England and to advise how to promote its study in schools of all levels, including Universities and other institutions of higher education. In connection with English studies the Report<sup>7</sup> emphasized two major factors: first the new sense of national pride: "It is only quite lately that we in England have begun to have the definite consciousness, which the French gained in the age of Louis XIV, that we have a great and independent literature of our own, which we need not lower its flag in the presence of the greatest on earth" (Baldick 1987: 94). They firmly believed that common pride in the national language and literature would bridge the gulf between classes, between industry and culture as well as between educated and uneducated. In addition, the members of the Newbolt committee also highlighted the international scope of the recognition of their tongue, another factor of national pride and hence of national reconciliation. They claimed that "English is nearer than ever before to becoming a universally known language.

The conditions created by the war have spread the knowledge of our language over the five continents of the earth...Most of this extension of English may be due to political or commercial reasons. But there are higher reasons too. The intrinsic value of our literature is increasingly recognized" (Baldick 1987: 89–90). The second factor on which the report focussed was the growing sense (shared both by the majority of ordinary people and the government) of the importance of education for everybody. In fact, in 1918 Lloyd George had declared that the strength of the Germans came from their schools, and that "An educated man is a better worker, a more formidable warrior, and a better citizen" (Baldick 1987: 93). Interestingly, statistics confirm a marked increase in the numbers of students enrolling in English from 1913 to 1920. As Caroline Spurgeon remarked, boys and girls of all classes have for generations gone through a form of education not aware of how literature could contribute to the full development of the mind and character of children. Besides, even those who had some access to it – i.e. upper-class schoolboys – tasted the ancient literatures of Greece and Rome, not their own. "Hence the bulk of English people of every class are unconsciously living starved existences," (Spurgeon 1922: 60) and the Report urged a system of liberal education promoting English as the foundation of all other branches of learning: "for English children, no form of knowledge can take precedence of [*sic*] a knowledge of English, no form of literature can take precedence of [*sic*] English literature... the two are so inextricably connected as to form the only basis possible for a national education" (Spurgeon 1922: 60). As she further reported, "More important still, every English child should be introduced to English literature, and should be helped through it to realize what great literature is, and, by that means, what great art is" (Spurgeon 1922: 61). For the committee members, the hope of the future lay in the convergence of everyday life with culture and poetry.

Their recommendations were of central importance to the development of English studies at the University level. As Caroline Spurgeon stated, "It is good to hear that

no teacher – be his work elementary or advanced – can be too highly gifted or too highly trained; that all our force must first be applied to him if we are to raise the mass; and that, therefore, it is a vital necessity and preliminary that the teacher should be properly trained at a university, properly equipped with libraries and other intellectual opportunities" (Spurgeon 1922: 63). In her account of the pamphlet's pages dealing with the universities, she further explained that, peculiar as it might sound to American scholars, a strong argument had to be developed to demonstrate the value of English studies. An historical survey of curricula showed that classics and mathematics had long dominated, obscuring the existence of a great literature of their own. English had hardly ever had any position at all in their universities, or been part of ordinary or recognized studies.

The pressure to throw off what some called "the alien yoke of Teutonic philology" (Baldick 1987: 87) was another decisive factor in the renewal of curricula. The war against Germany had fuelled the arguments against "Teutonic" culture. In 1917, the Dean of the Arts Faculty of St Andrews argued that the greatest danger was their enemies' *Kultur*, especially in matters connected with education. At Cambridge, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch delivered lectures on "Patriotism in English Literature" in which he claimed that German scholarship was unfit to approach the beauties of English literature. Similarly, at Oxford, Sir Walter Raleigh made a number of violent statements against German scholarship, best illustrated perhaps by two random examples: "German University culture is mere evil;" "the death of 100 Boche professors would be a benefit to the human race". His successor, George S. Gordon took an analogous line: "The war, which broke so many things, cannot be considered as wholly malignant in its consequences if it should prove to have broken our servility to the lower forms of German scholarship, that nightmare of organised boredom by which all grace and simplicity and nature were frightened from our studies" (Baldick 1987: 89). Caroline Spurgeon was also highly receptive to the report's strong reaction against the German form of philology; as she commented in her 1922 article, "the reaction that is taking place from that form of philology so aptly described by Sir Walter Raleigh as 'hypothetical sound-shiftings in the primaeval German forests'" was of special interest and made "a convincing case for a more literary and human study of language, its meanings and developments, especially during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries" (Spurgeon 1922: 63).

Yet her overall rejection of dry philology – i.e. mainly the study of etymology, sound changes, grammar, forms and relationships of languages – should not be interpreted only against the war and post-war background of anti German intellectualism. A clear curiosity about the cultural dimension of literature can be observed almost from the start of her scholarly activities, and in a way her spontaneous attraction for a different approach to texts was comparatively unrestricted because she did not belong to the University of Oxford. Initially, her

research on Chaucer allusions was not undertaken for one of their professors, but for Dr Furnivall and the Chaucer Society, and hence she was freer to compile what she called in 1901 "a history of his [Chaucer's] literary reputation" (Spurgeon 1901: viii). At the same time she got involved in other, not strictly philological, pieces of work, clearly trying to find her own method and approach. In 1907, for example, she authored the preface to *The Castle of Otranto*, by Horace Walpole, of which she was proud to write that Dr Furnivall thought it was "a very great piece of work, sound, well-written and interesting."<sup>8</sup> Let me also note that the climate of Bedford College London must have nurtured her own views. From May 1900, she was lecturing in London, and was appointed to the staff of Bedford College in 1901, first as assistant lecturer.

As a letter from A.W. Pollard of that same year notes, it became more and more difficult "to find any one man (or woman) able to combine the gift of literary exposition with the very high knowledge of philology now insisted on," (Wolff 2001: 98) and hence a second chair should be created in the English department. This came in 1913, and Caroline Spurgeon, who had become lecturer in literature in 1910, was appointed to it. Her correspondence significantly reflects her hesitations in the choice of a subject for her doctorate thesis. In a letter of 1907,<sup>9</sup> she deplored that she could not decide and revealed that she had been thinking of Rousseau or Robert Burns, but would leave it open till she had been to hear one of the lectures of Annie Besant, a social reformer, theosophist and activist. In November of the same year, she met Emile Legouis, who was going to be her supervisor at the Sorbonne, and who asked her to do some study of mysticism for her thesis.<sup>10</sup> However, on the last day of the same month, she announced: "I have practically settled on a subject for a thesis... writing particulars of it to France where I hope it will be approved. It is a study of the early life, surroundings, and influences on George Eliot, and an examination of her philosophy as revealed in her books. It has never been done – in fact very little has been written on her, and she is especially interesting because she sums up... all the great intellectual forces and movements of her time. First there would be the story of her childhood..., then the effect of Comte, Darwin and Spencer... and the whole force of English Puritanism – social and political – It would be interesting to French people, because it would, I think draw some comparisons between her and George Sand – who was practically a contemporary. Each of them the greatest woman novelist of their country... each so completely embodying the characteristics of her time and race...."<sup>11</sup> In another letter to her aunt, she detailed some of her motivations: "I propose to take my 'Doctorat de l'Université' in Paris, more because I wish to know something of French literature, and it is an object for doing a piece of original work than for the degree reason! Because I really do not now (being known and established) need the degree – and also the likelihood is that in a year or so, all Professors of the University of London will get honorary London degrees given to them, so that they may wear London robes and not robes belonging to all kinds of other Universities as is the case at



present." Let me add to this brief survey of the topics in which she was involved at that time that a couple of months later (December 1908) she was giving Ruskin lectures. Her hesitations and achievements of those years reflect the nature of her scholarly interests. She was more and more on the cultural and philosophical sides, and doing her thesis in another country also opened new avenues to her. Although I have gone through her archives and thoroughly read her correspondence to her aunt, I have not discovered information on why she eventually opted for Chaucer allusions. Anyway, it seems clear that at some stage she must have merged her dissertation project and her Chaucer undertaking into a single activity.

She could hence exploit the huge documentation she had gathered, and at the same time meet one of the greatest wishes of her old mentor, Dr Furnivall.<sup>12</sup> This was, however, definitely not a return to more traditional matters. She did not blindly compile references and passages, but examined them with the eyes of a scholar more and more involved in literary criticism. As most reviews of her book agree,<sup>13</sup> her book represented a major contribution to the history of literary taste. One of them argued that it was a textbook of criticism comparable to Matthew Arnold's essays or Sainte-Beuve's "Lundis," and that it brilliantly discussed major issues about the nature of criticism and of humour. Significantly enough, the reviewer was sensitive to the fresh blood that her approach brought to academic criticism: "The school of criticism in our University is perhaps second to none in the whole world, yet it is only in such a school that the necessity and value of such a book as this can ever be appreciated and its true value realised to the fullest extent."<sup>14</sup> Among the pieces in French in her archives, I have discovered the text of her viva in the Sorbonne. Not surprisingly, she claimed that she "felt very strongly about actually writing a chapter of the history of the evolution of a great nation's intelligence and soul", and that "it was a weird and suggestive thought that all the various pieces of criticism of which Chaucer has been the object for centuries should serve now not to judge Chaucer, but to judge precisely those who wrote them."<sup>15</sup>

Needless to say, when Caroline Spurgeon was appointed to the new Hildred Carlile Chair of English Literature in 1913, she put her ideas of literary criticism into practice, and she actually participated in the academic literary-critical renaissance of the 1920s and early 1930s, both through her teachings and writings, but also by inviting many distinguished people to lecture to the English Department and also by obtaining the appointment of a reader in English Literature in 1919 (Wolff 2001: 100). As we have seen, after writing on mysticism in English literature, she devoted much of her time to Shakespeare studies, an area in which she became a prominent figure. What is striking here is that, while she was particularly active in the feminist University politics – such as the co-founding and promoting of IFUW and its first presidency, or the establishment of Crosby Hall International Hall of Residence, and although the gender issue is definitely present in her correspondence, as well as, of course, in various pamphlets – feminism is totally absent from her scholarly books.

As Ina Schabert rightly recalled recently, in those early years of the establishment of English literature as an academic subject, "the study of literature is considered a profession, a 'discipline,' and therefore a masculine affair" (Schabert 2005: 257). However, Caroline Spurgeon marked a turning point in Shakespearean studies by pioneering a new approach, starting, oddly enough, with what has been called "a female tradition of literary studies" (Schabert 2005: 261). And, as Schabert further argued, "so it comes to no surprise that women doing literary studies adopt the masculine virtues of vigour and objectivity."

Yet simultaneously they develop...their own, different ideas about the nature of literature and the aims of literary studies....They introduce a double-voice discourse which brings a peculiar depth and richness to Shakespeare studies in the 1930s" (Schabert 2005: 257)

In conclusion let me echo Virginia Gildersleeve's remark that she "had the ability not only to inspire people with a vision but to make work for its fulfilment" (Poskitt 2006).

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> In a letter to her aunt (piece 59 of her archives) she expresses other motivations and explains that things were going to change in England: "I propose to take my 'Doctorat de l'Université' in Paris, more because I wish to know something of French literature, and it is an object for doing a piece of original work than for the degree reason! Because I really do not now (being known and established) need the degree – and also the likelihood is that in a year or so, all Professors of the University of London will get honorary London degrees given to them, so that they may wear London robes and not robes belonging to all kinds of other Universities as is the case at present." I will return to this point later in my article.

<sup>3</sup> *Chaucer devant la critique en Angleterre et en France depuis son temps jusqu'à nos jours. Thèse pour le doctorat d'Université (Lettres) présentée à la Faculté des Lettres de l'Université de Paris par Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, Paris, Hachette et Cie, 1911.*"

<sup>4</sup> Archives, PP/7/6/1/3.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Dyhouse (1995b)

<sup>6</sup> Oxford allowed women degrees in 1920; Cambridge withheld full membership of the university from women until 1948 (see Dyhouse 1995a: 482).

<sup>7</sup> Its full title is *Teaching of English in England being the report of the Departmental Committee appointed by the President of the Board of Education to inquire into the position of English in the educational system of England* (signed in April 1921, xv, 394, London, HMSO).

<sup>8</sup> Archives; letter to her aunt, 13 June 1907.

<sup>9</sup> Same letter of 13 June 1907

<sup>10</sup> Archives, letter of 12 November 1907, piece 43.

<sup>11</sup> Archives, 30 November 1907, piece 42.

<sup>12</sup> Archives, letter of April 1910: she reports that he has written to her : "You cannot help me except by finishing your Chaucer work at your leisure; and I shall like to hear of your success in Paris. "

<sup>13</sup> I can't help adding Walter Herries Pollock's appraisal in the *Evening Standard*, 17 Aug. 1911: "an entirely recent book by a French author on a very English subject."

<sup>14</sup> *The Kelso Chronicle*, 15 September 1911.

<sup>15</sup> Archives, PP7/4/1/2, my translation. For the full text and translation, see Juliette Dor, "Caroline Spurgeon and Relationships to Chaucer."