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The campus and the closet: Novel expressions of interwar queerness at the University of Oxford

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Abstract

The University of Oxford played an important role in the education of Britain's social and political elite. The university and its network of colleges, each of which maintains an archive, has preserved a detailed set of institutional records. There were stringent prohibitions against sexual liaisons of any kind on the part of students, but residential accommodation in single-sex colleges could facilitate homosexual connections. Reading between regulatory records and semi-autobiographical interwar novels enables us to understand the ways in which apparently repressive university structures facilitated closeted forms of queer life and tacit knowledge concerning them. Life in the colleges was also policed by students who deployed forms of sexualized bullying on their peers. These processes shaped the emergence of the homosexual closet on campus.

Keywords

closet, Oxford, homosexuality, students, universities

Students at the University of Oxford were officially held to strict Christian moral standards in the decades before World War Two. In accordance with ancient tradition men and women were segregated from one another. From 1879, when women began attending the University of Oxford until a process of reform that began in 1974, students

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were accommodated in single-sex colleges. The surrounding streets were patrolled by university police who fined students for unauthorized fraternization. Same-sex sexual intimacy was also banned and subject to stringent penalties. Those who were caught were typically 'sent down' (dismissed) from the University. This meant that they had to abandon their studies and were not permitted to return. Until the later nineteenth century even the 'dons' (academics) were expected in most cases to be unmarried, and colleges were understood as being, in essence, communities of celibates.

Previous work on nineteenth-century queer cultures at Oxford and Cambridge has often tended to focus on lecturers and their intellectual ideas, especially those related to the classics, Christianity and aestheticism (Dowling 1994). Recent studies on the early twentieth century have brought to light companionate relationships and, in the case of one exceptional place, King's College, Cambridge, an unusually supportive environment for discreetly queer academics (Goldhill, 2025). While there were ad hoc expulsions for queer sexual offences there was no equivalent of the purge led by the President and Acting Dean of Harvard University in 1920 (Wright, 2005). Rutherford (2025: 163-222) has developed the persuasive argument that single-sex colleges were places where older patterns of same-sex emotional friendships were being reconceptualised as homosexual at the very time that co-education and heterosexual identities were becoming the norm across British higher education (Myers, 2010). Male students across the country, meanwhile, were buttressing their masculinity through practices of ragging that parodied those who did not fit the evolving normative conceptions of gender, race and sexuality (Rutherford, 2025: 107-132).

A distinctive feature of Oxford (and to a slightly lesser extent Cambridge) student life was gendered stereotyping of 'athletes' and 'hearties' as masculine and 'aesthetes' or 'arties' as effeminate. A heightened awareness that amounted to a 'crisis of university masculinity' had been precipitated by the arrival of women students, even if they could not take Oxford degrees before 1920 (Deslandes 2005: 187). This was also connected with the rise in ideals of muscular training in the public schools (Mangan 1981). The primary identification of these two stock figures of student life was with interests, respectively, in sport and culture. However, in the wake of homosexual revelations concerning Oscar Wilde—one of the most prominent aesthetes, and sometime Oxford undergraduate (1874-78)—student aestheticism, particularly when involving a focus on literary pursuits, increasingly began to be read as a form of effeminacy with queer significance (Bristow, 1995).

Oxford University has not only preserved a detailed archive of disciplinary records, but also of self-expression on the part of current or former students in the form of diaries, letters, journal articles, plays and novels. Ross Brooks (2020) has used such materials to construct a picture of student life at 1930s Oxford when, as the understanding and visibility of homosexuality became more apparent to the student body, queerly aesthetic students were increasingly forced to consort in cultural clubs such as the Oxford University Dramatic Society (2020: 832). My contribution to this work highlights that the traditional University mechanisms of enforcing sexual abstinence on students were ill equipped to deal with a new era of the gendered performance of heterosexuality and that students often took it upon themselves to regulate the behaviour of their peers. I evidence this by exploring a series of more-or-less autobiographical interwar novels.

Queerness and the closet

Recovering the viewpoints of queer, same-sex-attracted people living in the early twentieth century can be challenging because discriminatory legal regimes and hostile public opinion necessitated varying degrees of discretion, secrecy and concealment. Explicit investigation into the welfare of LGBTQ students is a relatively recent concern. One example, 'Out at Cambridge', was a nine-month long study conducted in 2019 'to promote interdisciplinary research, outreach and network building related to queer, trans and sexuality studies at the University of Cambridge' (Sandler, 2022: 224). This project, funded by and conducted within the University, included interviews with students that explored issues around their comfort with disclosing sexuality and gender identity. Its focus was thus on paradigms centred on inclusion and visibility. As an earlier US study had argued, such initiatives can link with social justice through enabling universities to improve their welfare provision, address duty of care concerns and aid with retention (Sanlo, 2004). Enabling not only students but also academics in higher education to act openly as their authentic selves can, it has been argued, not only further their own well-being but also bolster awareness of LGBTQ issues across the institution (Nielsen and Alderson, 2014). These perspectives derived from early patterns of activism that argued that those who concealed their sexuality were in a place of social exclusion, shame and oppression. The centrality of this notion can be seen from the title of one of the most important pioneering histories of same-sex desiring people: Jeffrey Weeks's, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (1977; see also Clawson, 2014).

Although the term 'homosexual' was known and sometimes used by students before 1939 to refer to themselves (Janes, 2022a: 182-183) the concepts of 'coming out' and 'the closet' were not. This requires us to think about earlier paradigms for sexual non-conformity. The moral discipline enforced at Oxford was directly related to its identity as a Protestant Christian institution in a country that had instituted the death penalty for buggery in the course of the Reformation (Moran, 2002: 81-82; Duffy, 2001: 340; Jordan, 2001: 181). This imperative focused on the prevention of sexual acts rather than the suppression of sexual identities which were, in any case, only formed during modernity. The result was that when celibate same-sex attracted people lived in such same-sex communities it is possible to understand them developing their own self-understandings in private—a process that Jeffrey Weeks (2011: 27) has called 'comfortable 'ghetto-ization' (compare Brockenbrough, 2012).

Students, of course, were only living in these environments on a temporary basis which may have facilitated their willingness to express critical feelings albeit often, as will be seen, in coded forms such as fiction. Interestingly, perhaps, the key theorization of closet knowledge in queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (2008; 1st edition 1990), centred on the emergence of queer visibility in novels, particularly works of Marcel Proust published in the early 1920s. Attributes of clothing, behaviour and deportment appeared as more or less subtle codes to sexual non-conformity at the time. Sedgwick (2008, 231, discussed by Janes, 2015: 3-9), therefore, identified such a 'spectacle of the closet as the truth of the homosexual.' Gender was crucial to such 'closet dynamics' (Smith et al. (1998), since male femininity was revealed

as the truth of the closet in comparison with the masculinity of the 'normal' man. As I will go on to argue such dynamics can be used to analyse the ways in which students during the interwar period began to express and police novel understandings of sexualized identities.

University discipline

The origins of the colleges were as halls of residence which accommodated tutors and their students. The University itself appears to have been administered since the thirteenth century, and perhaps even earlier, by Proctors. Their role was split between a Senior and Junior official, and focussed on the regulation of student affairs, including matters of discipline. There was much to do because the medieval University saw frequent student violence, including homicides, and repeated attempts to restrict ownership of weapons (Larsen, 2022: 180). This extended to patrolling the streets of Oxford accompanied by burly assistants later popularly known as 'bulldogs'. Students who were apprehended by them were subject to a range of penalties, most often fines. In cases of criminal behaviour the proctors had professional backup. The Oxford University Police was established in 1829 as a result of the Universities Act (1825). The Oxford Police Act (1868) created a joint University and Town police force, but the University-appointed officials continued to police a wide range of criminalized behaviour including sex work.[1] The University was thus directly involved in policing contacts between 'gown' (the students) and 'town' (the locals).

Implicit concerns had surfaced before World War One in relation to male students' work with boys' clubs and tramps (homeless people).[2] Student parties in hired premises in the town were also policed, as when a group of students from Christ Church, Magdalen College and the Ruskin School of Drawing were quizzed by the Proctors, in spring 1932, about an unauthorized party. They were asked whether, amongst other things, they were expecting men to be there in female dress. Cross-dressing had long been a traditional element of student life partly because single-sex performance was required by the University (in order to keep male and female students separate) of the college theatrical societies that, unlike the Oxford University Dramatic Society, could not afford to hire professional actresses (Janes, 2022b). By the interwar period, however, the playing of female roles by men (and vice versa) and cross-dressing in general was starting to become associated with sexual queerness and gender nonconformity (Rutherford, 2025: 147-58; Janes, 2022a). Four students were duly fined £5 and gated (required to return to college each day by a set time) for an extensive period on the grounds of the cross-dressing and the presence of undesirable persons (Anon, 1932).[3]

Student publications distributed across the University were also kept under surveillance. A decade before this provocative party Gerald Gardiner, a future Lord Chancellor (minister of justice and highest-ranking cabinet minister), had been rusticated (suspended from his studies) for writing a review in a student periodical of an invented sexological pamphlet, *I turpi amori delle Donne* ('*The Shameful Loves of Women*'), that had supposedly been written by a scholar at Oxford and which explored lesbianism, masturbation and prostitution.[4] Such pranking suggests that the official silence on queer desire, both male and female, was starting to be called out by the more daring and

progressive students during the interwar period. This then, as we shall see, was sometimes met with violent responses by hostile students who, as was the case in the various public schools from which many of them came, collectively policed the behaviour of their peers.

College life and fiction

While the streets were under systems of direct University and police surveillance, things were otherwise in the colleges. Discipline was maintained there too, of course, but was done in such a way that few systematic records were kept of cases of sexual misconduct. By contrast with this, certain forms of violent behaviour were seen as regrettable but normative expressions of youthful rebellion and treated as routine elements of college life from which the authorities could even profit through the imposition of fines. Records of these have occasionally been preserved, as in the case of a series of battels (college) bills at Queen's College, from 1902 to 05, which had pre-printed entries for amounts that could be filled in by hand not just for University Dues (fees), College Dues, and Bedmaker's (college servants who did cleaning and other duties) Wages, but also for Gate Fines (for returning late), Glazier's Bills (for smashed windows), and Damage (any other destruction).[5]

Colleges housed most of the University's students and provided a strong focus for communities and friendships. It is no surprise, therefore, that novels of student life focussed strongly on these smaller units of the campus environment. Evolving attitudes to gender and sexuality in the interwar period made publishers more willing to bring queer-flavoured narratives to the reading public that—even if these were written after going down (on completion of studies)—provide a valuable insight into student life. Campus-based novels, moreover, could use the alibi of fiction to find inspiration in real-life events for narratives that hinted more or less openly about the role of queerness in university life.

Evelyn Waugh left university without taking a degree but, that notwithstanding, became one of Britain's most well-known satirical novelists. His first major work *Decline and Fall* (2017, 1st edition 1928) took its name from Edward Gibbon's acclaimed multi-volume *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-89). The sapping of Roman power was popularly ascribed to processes of moral and cultural degeneration similar to those which Waugh conjures in his satirical presentation of 1920s Britain as an heir to fin-de-siècle decadence. His novel is partly based on his own experiences as a schoolboy at Lancing College, at the University of Oxford (1922-24), and then as a teacher in a provincial private school. Waugh's fictional protagonist, Paul Pennyfeather, experienced a trajectory in which he was sent down from Oxford for being the victim of a drunken assault by other male students.

> Mr Sniggs [Junior Dean] was looking rather apprehensively at Mr Postlethwaite [Domestic Bursar].
> 'They appear to have caught somebody,' he said. 'I hope they don't do him any serious harm.'
> 'They appear to be tearing off his clothes' (Waugh, 2017: 8)

The two debate whether they should intervene but decide against it on the grounds that they too might be assaulted and that 'the prestige of the senior common-room' required that 'we must at all costs avoid [such] an *outrage*' [emphasis in original] (Waugh, 2017:

8). At College meeting the next day the fellows were delighted to be able to level heavy fines against the miscreants because they could use the funds to pay for more drink for themselves.

> 'The case of Pennyfeather,' the Master [Head of the College] was saying, 'seems to be quite a different matter altogether. He ran the whole length of the quadrangle, you say, *without his trousers*. *That* [emphasis in original] is indecency. It is not the conduct we expect of a scholar' (Waugh, 2017: 9).

Waugh's narrative is a comic exaggeration, but it contained elements of serious critique based on contemporary realities. Colleges tolerated a certain level of violence on the part of their male students and even, to some degree, treated this as a display of normative masculinity. Such behaviour was often associated with the revels of wealthy students who could afford to pay substantial fines and was particularly associated with events they staged as members of exclusive societies such as the Bullingdon Club. This particular assault was sparked when a drunken aristocrat belonging to an elite social society, the fictional Bollinger (champagne) Club, leapt to the conclusion that Pennyfeather was masquerading as a fellow member because the old school tie that he was wearing looked very similar to that of the Club. Thus debagging was also associated with the reassertion of social privilege over those of lower status.

Tearing off the trousers of a less physically assertive student, particularly one who was not rich and socially well-connected, was not an 'outrage' in the way that an assault on a college official would be. Oxford bags were particularly wide-legged trousers of a kind often worn by aesthetic and fashionable young men, and thus this was a scene of 'debagging' (Lee, 2025). This form of personal assault was a well-known feature of student life along with dunking in the river and breaking furniture. Such activity derived from practices of bullying in single-sex public (fee-paying) schools. A group of men who ripped off a young woman's skirt in public would have been suspected of a sexualized form of moral outrage, noting that it was sadly commonplace for the victim to the blamed for supposedly enticing such behaviour. It was only because of the official blindness to the prevalence of same-sex attraction that similar behaviour could be seen as a form of high spirits.[6]

Evelyn Waugh's possible bisexuality has been the subject of considerable debate (Wilson, 1996: 14, 45 and 137). His novels, particularly, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), can be read from queer perspectives, and, indeed *Vile Bodies* (1928) appeared in the wake of his dismissal from his second teaching post on the grounds of alleged sexual misconduct. He appears to have been 'actively homosexual' in his relationships when he was a student at Oxford but he subsequently married and fathered seven children (Stannard, 2011). In the absence of detailed diaries, the private lives of lesser-known novelists often remain obscure. One such was Edward Tangye Lean, the brother of the film director, David Lean. The former's main claim to literary fame was that he was a founder member while a student at Oxford (1929-33) of The Inklings society, which was also attended by J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis who later took over the club.

Lean's student novel *Storm in Oxford: A Fantasy* (1932) depicts the loving relationship between two Italian—this detail distances them from English norms—

brothers, Lorenzo and Ludovici (known, androgynously, as Vici). This character device can be understood as a way in which same-sex love could be presented. Early in the term the well-built Captain of Boats visits, keen to encourage, or perhaps to bully, freshers (new students) into rowing. Lorenzo says that his favoured sport is fencing, to which the Captain retorts, '"What you want is developing. I tell you fencing's an aesthete's game and won't ever do you any good. Look at those arms of yours"' (Lean, 1932: 31). Noticing Lorenzo's lovely blue shirt, the rower accused the other of being a 'pansy' (effeminate homosexual). He denies it, saying that it belonged to his father who was killed by the Italian fascists and demonstrates his manly strength by smashing his own table before the other could do so. The political reference acts to delegitimize traditional forms of student rowdiness by associating them with foreign-derived extremism (Rutherford, 2025: 131).

Effeminacy originated in the notion of a wont of manly vigour but, by the interwar period, was being increasingly associated with queer men. These were also stereotyped as being narcissistic lovers of themselves and their own kind, following the model of the classical myth of Narcissus who was turned into the beautiful bloom of the same name. Hence it was no accident that a strongly effeminate figure in the novel was named St Vincent Flower. Lorenzo's aesthetic brother Vici was also notably unmasculine. His room, ming vases and all, was smashed while he was assaulted by the athletes. His cat attempted to defend him and was killed. Notably the description of the debagging is described as a kind of sexualized assault:

> suddenly a score of hands were ripping at his clothes, tearing, ripping, splitting the flimsy silk from him in shreds. Coarse nails scratched his slender body, gripping, swollen fingers snatched the trousers from his legs, and he was standing there white and naked with the drunken rowing men around him (Lean, 1932: 196).

He is dragged down to the river and thrown in. 'Most of the drunken rowing men were already heading back up the High [the main street of Oxford], their lust for destruction satiated, their coarse faces sheepish after the orgy,' when Lorenzo dives in to rescue his brother (Lean, 1932: 204). Lorenzo knocks down the Captain of Boats and goes back to his room with his brother: Tonight '"you'll sleep with me"', said Lorenzo' (Lean, 1932: 207). Vici, however, does not live happily ever after since we read that he is later killed in a car crash. This was in accordance with well-established tropes by which sympathetically drawn homosexual figures were often projected as dying tragically early deaths. As with Waugh's representation of a similar set of events the drunken athletes are not sent down. That fate is reserved for Lorenzo. The events appear to have been closely connected to Lean's own experience. He attended University College, Oxford, which had a strong athletic tradition, where his furniture was smashed and he was thrown into the river. He also penned a short story, published in the student periodical *Isis* in 1931 in which a character like himself writes a 'rather homosexual sort of novel' (Gilliver, 2016: 71).

The following year Oxford was embroiled in public controversy over a novel that went much further in its overt queering of college life—Richard Rumbold's *Little Victims* (1933). This, as its title suggests, specifically engaged with psychological trauma as a

central aspect of queer youth (Brooks, 2020, 837-839). His alter ego, Christopher Harmsworth (notice that this is a charactonym), suffers a variety of forms of sexualized bullying including debagging at his public school, in an environment where homosexual advances by older boys and even masters was normalized. He was, thus, unsurprised by the amorous attention he immediately received on arriving at Oxford from a tutor whose rooms were lined with pictures and photographs, 'all of young men in white shirts *à la Rupert Brooke*' (1933: 83). Recovering from this he joins up with the college aesthetes and duly has his room trashed by the hearties. This was repeated, together with a dunking, after he spoke against social privilege at the Oxford Union and it was reported in the national press that '"a young man of artistic and literary temperament"' had been attacked by '"a number of titled and other undergraduates"' (1933: 107). Pining for a special 'friend' who would offer him mutual love and respect he shoots himself after unsuccessfully attempting to have an affair with a woman (1933: 4 and 89).

From the evidence of his posthumously published diaries (Rumbold, 1964) and autobiography, *My Father's Son* (1949), which appeared under a pseudonym, it is clear that Rumbold was essentially portraying himself. He had grown up in a wealthy Roman Catholic family, with a father who was abusive and whose mother and sister killed themselves. When at Christ Church, Oxford (1931-34) he re-established the English Club and drew a large crowd by inviting Lord Alfred Douglas to speak (1963: 29). Furthermore, he enjoyed going to aesthetic parties which were 'gay and extravagant affairs in which the more feminine undergraduates would dress up in female attire, discuss their love affairs and dance together' (1949: 158). He explained that an initial assault was prompted by his ostentatious contempt for the hearties, but that the next one was directly the result of the publication of his novel (1949: 166; 1964: 33). It seems that the boys who had led in sexual play at boarding school had become the young men who could not tolerate this being made public at university.

The plots of fiction set in women's colleges differ from the pattern identified above. For example, Gertrude Trevelyan's *Hot-House* (1933) fictionalized the author's experience as a student at Lady Margaret Hall (1923-27) and is rich in emotional entanglement but lacking in overt sexuality and violence. Admiration for female beauty does surface in some slightly earlier novels by women about women, such as in *The Chesterton Girl Graduates: A Story for Girls* (1913) by Elizabeth Thomasina Meade Smith, who, writing as L. T. Meade, was a prolific author of girl's stories. The protagonist of this novel, unlike that of Rumbold's, *does* have a special 'friend', whose hand she kisses with her 'passionate red lips' (1913, 11-12).

Laura Schwartz, in her study of St Hugh's College, Oxford, indicates that close companionate relationships in women's colleges were not uncommon. These were not publicly viewed as sexual but 'the intensity with which [some of] these women felt for each other must have been fuelled by erotic energy' (Schwartz, 2011, 69). By the interwar years, as knowledge of lesbianism became more widespread, such relationships were increasingly framed by participants and observers as focussed on sexuality. This led to a new open secret of the masculine and feminine woman who loved each other such as appeared in Dorothy L. Sayers's *Unnatural Death* (1927; Moulton, 2019, 136-137) and, most famously, in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) which has been read as a milestone in both lesbian and trans self-expression.

The contemporary parallel with men's culture here seems to find expression in the non-fiction study *Degenerate Oxford? A Critical Study of Modern University Life* (1930) by Terence Greenidge who was a close friend of Evelyn Waugh at Hertford College, Oxford, when they were students in the early 1920s. According to Greenidge 'romantic' relationships, that might sometimes be sexual but were often 'Platonic', were apt to blossom between athletes and aesthetes (Brooks, 2020, 826-827). If this was the case then we can understand that attacks by the former on the latter were partly spurred on by evolving understandings of male homosexual relationships which demanded both some sort of gender binary between the two and also a degree of inverted femininity in both partners. This was most challenging for the more masculine of the two who was, therefore, especially impelled by such gendered expectations to build himself a closet.

Tacit knowledge

It appears, at least from these examples of fictional narratives, that University and College discipline were aligned in supporting a system in which student abuse against queerly marginal individuals was to some degree institutionally condoned. Because trousers were emblematical of masculinity, to be debagged was, in effect, to be gender-queered as unmanly. This act also provided, under the alibi of vigilante violence, an occasion for intimate contact between men that secured the supposed normality of the perpetrators. The implication of this was that students were discouraged from displays of queer non-conformity in their everyday lives that might make them targets for ritualized violence and that same-sex desire was effectively closeted not just through personal choice but also through collective practice. Patterns of secrecy and discretion can be seen operating in the construction of the archive, in the regulation of personal style and behaviour and in the ways in which the University and the colleges acted as self-regulating spaces. The expression of same-sex desire was, thus, tacitly known about and regulated without it always being explicitly acknowledged. Fictional narratives provided authors with some flexibility in dealing with such controversial topics.

Exploring the wider significance of this case study suggests further reflection on the interlinked topics of spaces, identities and periodisation. Understanding campus epistemologies of the closet relies on Sedgwick's pioneering work, but it is important to note that she has faced criticism on several grounds, particularly in relation to the idea of the importance of visibility as a specifically white and western late-twentieth-century paradigm rather than something that is universal (Liinason, 2020). Geographers have also expressed concerns about 'all the metaphorical, nonmaterial and relentlessly textual dimensions of the book (Sedgwick was, after all, an English professor)' (Brown et al., 2011: 124). This view drew on work such as Michael P. Brown (2000: 2) *Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe* which 'attempts to reorient a tendency in queer theory to conceptualise the closet as an aspatial force.'

Such approaches help us to make an important distinction between the University and its constituent colleges. The campus, at Oxford, was amorphous to the extent that students did sometimes live in lodgings in the town, and the University maintained authority over its members in the public streets. The colleges meanwhile provided private residential accommodation in buildings centred on a chapel and dining hall. Descended as

they are—in architectural form at least—from medieval monasteries, 'the very topography of the colleges often gives the impression that they were designed to keep the outside world at bay; stout gates, barred windows and spikes on walls' (Tapper and Palfreyman, 2000: 137). Such places offered possibilities of degrees of concealment from public view, at least for those who were not singled out for their exceptional deviance. The institutional logic for policing sexuality was above-all focussed on ensuring that there were no public scandals. Notably it has been suggested that the official and unofficial disciplinary systems of the University, its colleges and student body, were intended not to eliminate queer people but to strengthen the closet. Moran (1996), for example, has argued that the reforming Sexual Offences Act (1967) was intended to facilitate purely private homosexual lives and exclude the police from interfering with them—which is what colleges, in effect, did. Related arguments have been made about the US legal tradition (Eskridge, 1999).

One approach to understanding the ways in which the campus, thereby, began to act as a closet is to focus on the notion of tacit knowledge of diversity. Most students came to the University of Oxford from single-sex public schools where same-sex activity was a widely known disciplinary 'problem' that was not restricted to seemingly effeminate boys (Janes, 2015: 119-134). Researchers who have explored lives in contemporary global Latina/o cultures have suggested that those people often negotiate varying levels of tacit knowledge depending on their social context (Decena, 2011). For example, a study of 'sexually nonconforming' Latina women has identified their social spaces as varying in their degrees of visibility and invisibility (Acosta, 2011, 883). Applying those insights to the situation at Oxford would suggest that it was tacitly understood that there were a range of situations where homosexual scandal could take place, including interactions between students and boys and between athletes and aesthetes. As a result, students or former students fictionalising the campus experience could draw attention to differing places of self-expression and various styles of masculinity which could—but need not necessarily—be read as queer. Debagging and expulsion could not prevent any queer culture from taking place, but they could regulate the limits of its overtness.

A further aspect of the aforementioned studies is that they take an intersectional approach which indicates that sexuality should not be seen as separate from other aspects of identity such as race. In this context it is interesting to observe that the adjective 'colourful' was applied both to non-white students and allegedly effeminate aesthetes (Janes, 2024). The construction of understandings of student diversity, therefore, emerged from consideration of both visible and invisible aspects of sexuality and ethnicity. Just as the admission of women students put earlier forms of traditional masculinity under pressure, so increasing racial diversity during the early twentieth century brought about a rising awareness of student diversity, and perhaps a concomitant increase in bullying. The heterosexual gendering of student life that was taking place in the interwar period invites us to think about the ways in which contemporary misogyny both impelled supposedly masculine men into the closet and focussed hostility on those men who were held to be feminized. This can, as in a recent study of 'trans misogyny' (Gill-Peterson, 2024), be seen in a wider, indeed global, perspective, in which imperial power weaponized developing notions of binary gender as techniques of power and control. Oxford colleges were small worlds, but many of their students went on to have influential

public careers not only in Britain but across its empire. The policing of visible expressions of same-sex desire not only by college authorities but also by the students themselves was, thereby, arguably an aspect of, colonial violence.

In conclusion

Much of the humour in Tom Sharpe's novel *Porterhouse Blue* (1974), a satirical portrait of an overly traditional Cambridge college, comes from a mismatch between the attitudes of the academics and of contemporary students. From the former's perspective the scandal that had to be concealed was not the death of one of the students, who was having a sexual affair with his cleaner, Mrs Biggs, but the fact that this was due to exploding gas-filled condoms (1974: 97). This fictional incident may well have been inspired by the events that led to the disgrace of the poet William Empson. He arrived at Magdalene College, Cambridge, in 1925 and had a variety of same-sex experiences without any public scandal. It was only when he began having sex with a woman in 1929 and a cleaner found condoms (referred euphemistically as 'engines of love' in the college records) that he was expelled from his bye-fellowship (Hughes, 2016; Haffenden, 2005: 243). Sex in college that required neither a person of the opposite sex nor prophylactics could, by contrast, go much more easily undetected.

Attacks by conformist hearties on adventurous aesthetes who threatened to make homosexuality newly visible on campus can be seen as an interwar variation in patterns of student gendering going ultimately as far back as divisions between secular and clerical masculinities in the medieval University. Larsen (2022, 185-186) interprets the former as using violence to assert their masculine identities as future heads of households in opposition to the authorities who tried to hold them, and not only those who intended to take Holy Orders, to celibacy. But it was not until well into the twentieth century that gender in our contemporary sense began to be understood (Moulton, 2023, 77) and sexual desire for women established as a defining norm for all adult men. Desire at single-sex public schools continued to be structured along divides between younger and older pupils but this was increasingly being replaced by sexualized binary gender divides at university. A lack of overt interest in the opposite sex duly became increasingly seen not as devout and studious, or even as eccentric (Moulton, 2013), but as abnormal. At the same time increasingly positive attitudes to sexual desire in general prompted some daring students to appreciate and express their same-sex desires more openly. Male violence was then deployed against those who thereby threatened to associate their single-sex communities with queerness. This had the result of constructing the homosexual closet on campus.

It is important in summing up to stress the early-twentieth-century date of my case study. A survey of several decades of LGTBQ alumni from Princeton (which is a useful elite university comparator for Oxford), labelled three successive phases of student sexualities as 'perverse proclivity', 'collective identity' and 'postgay' (Chica, 2019: 2). This research implied that alumni experiences should not be judged by 'homonormative' expectations established in the 'collective identity' era of later twentieth-century lesbian and gay liberation, including those that assumed a linear trajectory from the shame-filled

closet to authentic openness. Does this critique, thus, imply that the concept of the closet should itself be abandoned in relation to my current micro-history of pregay student life?

Andrew Tucker (2009: 188), in his study of queer visibilities in contemporary Cape Town, has argued that the closet has an enduring utility today since 'what it does teach us about how heteronormative regulation more broadly can function is vital when exploring any community where some sort of heterosexual/homosexual binary prevails.' Interwar Oxford was a place when such a sexual binary was becoming increasingly recognised, yet the disciplinary mechanisms of official fines and exclusions derived from an earlier pre-identity age. The campus closet duly emerged as an expanding repository of queerness (Kim, 2023: 113) that was protected (to some degree) by official rules, but which was also, at the same time, partly the product of intimidation that extended to physical abuse.

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Notes

1. H. B. Poland, 'The University of Oxford as to dealing with prostitutes', June 21, 1892; University of Oxford archives, Bodleian Library, Pr1/5/5.
2. Boys' Clubs papers; University of Oxford archives, Bodleian Library, Pr1/23/9/3.
3. Planning an unauthorized party, letter, Senior Proctor to the Dean of Magdalen College, March 4, 1932; University of Oxford archives, Bodleian Library, Pr1/23/9/5.
4. Truth about Somerville pamphlet correspondence; University of Oxford archives, Bodleian Library, Pr1/23/9/4.
5. Eglesfield Musical Society, misc. papers, 1900-1990s; The Queen's College, Oxford archives, FB 2740.
6. This may be compared with the slow recognition of male rape by the English legal system (Severs, 2024: 199).

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