Margaret Todd's Novel Mentorship in 'Mona Maclean Medical Student'

By Anne Stapleton

Published eight years after Robert Louis Stevenson's 'The Body Snatcher' (1884) and two years before Arthur Conan Doyle's anthology of medical stories *Round the Red Lamp* (1894), Margaret Todd's *Mona Maclean Medical Student: A Novel* (1892) highlights similar medical topics yet evinces a strikingly different female sensibility in relation to training and physician-patient relationships. One of the first students at the Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women, Todd was actually in medical school while she wrote and published her novel under the pseudonym Graham Travers.[1] Like other women writing fin-de-siècle fiction, she was attuned to female experience and explored gender roles, particularly linked to education. In contrast to many New Women authors, though, Todd eschewed the late-century trend toward short fiction, perhaps because the sustained length of the three-volume novel provided the narrative space to introduce and resolve a number of divisive issues that evoke debate amongst characters. Todd is not heavy-handed in her message of female empowerment, however. In her engaging *Bildungsroman*, she explores dilemmas as her protagonist counsels those she mentors. Likewise, Mona Maclean learns from friends, family, and teachers. One memorable physician, Dr. Alice Bateson, reflects Sophia Jex-Blake, with whom Todd had a professional and personal relationship.[2] Mining personal experience to explore two issues that would have resonated with contemporary readers in Scotland—dissection by women, in particular, and medical education for women, in general—Todd suggests that women are ideally suited to study the human body and treat patients.

In *Mona Maclean*, Todd alludes to Scotland's fraught history with dissection as she reconfigures the Scottish literary landscape with sage female medical students who offer a fresh future. She broaches anatomical study as she explores relationships between students, anatomists, and physicians. Her own experiences

at the Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women unfolded in Surgeons' Square, an area that had 'thrilling and sinister associations with Burke and Hare', although Jex-Blake had refurbished 'the famous old premises' as she sought to establish her new school for women in 1886.[3] In *The Doctor Dissected*, Caroline McCracken-Flesher persuasively argues that Burke and Hare remain infamous today, long after the discovery in 1828 that the two Irishmen had sold freshly murdered corpses to the prominent Edinburgh anatomist Robert Knox, who taught anatomy to hundreds of medical students in Surgeons' Square. Suggestions of Dr. Knox's complicity also persist, while during the final decades of the nineteenth century, 'Stevenson opens the doctor to the cleansing air of public inspection in stories such as 'The Body Snatcher' and *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.[4] Todd's *Mona Maclean Medical Student*, in contrast, shifts focus to the potential of medical women and provides an appealing alternative for Scotland's future. Unlike Stevenson, Todd approaches the topic of dissection with disarming humor, cogent discussions, and unexpected analogies, such as when one medical student playfully compares the '"art of dissecting"' to the '"art of dressing one's hair"'.[5] Rather than resisting Victorian gender ideology or reinforcing the idea that women should not deal with bodies, Todd emphasizes how a woman's experiences and nature prepare her for anatomical training and medical practice.

Discussions about women's medical education also engaged public interest at the time, and the year *Mona Maclean Medical Student* was published, Scottish universities were authorized 'to make provision for the instruction and graduation of women'; two years later, Marion Gilchrist, Alice (Lily) Cumming, Elizabeth Lyness, and Margaret Dewar 'became the first women to graduate in Medicine from a Scottish university'.[6] Prior to that, women entering the medical profession had faced intense opposition, particularly in Edinburgh.[7] Todd's enthusiastic protagonist provides an apt illustration of the struggles a contemporary student might face. In the first few chapters, for instance, readers discover Mona has already failed her exams twice. This initial lack of academic success galvanizes her journey from London to the small village of Borrowness, Scotland, where Mona works in her cousin's shop and few know she has been a medical student. While there, she gathers botanical specimens on her days off, meets eligible bachelors who vie for her attention, and provides moral and medical guidance to young women she meets. Intermittent visits to Edinburgh serve a different

purpose, as Mona counters arguments against female physicians posed by her friend's conservative father. Ultimately, Mona returns to the London School of Medicine for Women and wins the gold medal in physiology, realizing that hospital work is her '"salvation"' and that '"the making of the future lies"' in women's hands, conclusions at which she arrives through a number of discussions with both men and women.[8]

Todd's novel most differs from contemporary medical fiction by demystifying dissection in order to develop the then-radical idea that women are ideally suited to undertake anatomical study and to care for patients who seek their services. She also counters narratives featuring women as victims. Unlike Mary Paterson, in *Mary Paterson or The Fatal Error*, whose 'pickled' body was 'sketched by student artists in positions disturbingly reminiscent of Venus—simultaneously classical and vaguely pornographic', as McCracken-Flesher and others point out[9], or Jane Galbraith, in Stevenson's 'The Body Snatcher', whose bruised and 'duly dissected' body cinches Fettes's realization that the prostitute 'he had jested with the day before' has been murdered by the 'ghouls' who deliver fresh corpses to medical students[10], Mona and other female medical students are '"happy, healthy, sensible, hard-working girls"', as Mona's friend Doris remarks after meeting female students and visiting their dissecting room.[11] They are also ethical professionals as they master the skills needed at the dissecting table.

Initially, the narrator eases readers into the idea of women's aptitude for anatomy classes through striking references to dissection in chapters devoted to other topics. For example, in the first three chapters, Mona and Lucy, Mona's friend and fellow medical student, await and then discover the results of their exams. The narrator slips Lucy's incongruous pairing of hair-dressing and dissection into the friends' discussion of families, finances, and the future. Lucy claims that '"from the point of view of success in practice, the art of dressing one's hair is at least as important as the art of dissecting"' and then, fittingly, adjusts 'her dark-red curls'.[12] Framing Lucy's statement with a carefully orchestrated scene 'In the Garden', the name of the first chapter, Todd suggests women are positioned to succeed in both arts, which take practice and perhaps come naturally to women. Equating hairdressing with dissection, both very different forms of corporeal manipulation, she also rewrites an early history of surgery associated with barbers, by offering a more feminine possibility, without vestiges of violence

associated with Burke and Hare.

By chapter four, when seventeen-year-old Mona meets her aristocratic uncle Sir Douglas for the first time (and the reader learns her family's history), she can more fully address his question of '"You dissect?"'. Mona wonders how she could 'explain to this man the wonder and the beauty of the work that he dismissed in a brutal phrase'.[13] Countering his claim that dissection '"is human butchery"', Mona admits her first day in the dissecting room was '"ghastly"' but that those who pursue study over time can see '"the wonder and the beauty of it"'.[14] A bit predictable in a Victorian novel, perhaps, she embodies and reflects her passion to '"be a true anatomist"', and Sir Douglas sees at that moment 'she was beautiful. Such a light is only seen in the eyes of those who can see the ideal in the actual'.[15] Thus, while Sir Douglas sees beauty in the woman speaking, Mona sees beauty in the work itself, dissection, something that requires being a '"mechanician and a scientist, an artist and a philosopher"'.[16] Mona often links medicine, science, and art while recognizing the importance of anatomy for understanding and treating patients responsibly.

Todd also evokes images of women successfully applying the skills and philosophies of traditional pastimes to their new work as anatomists, such as the '"Irish girl who could only remember the nerves of the arm by ligaturing them with different-coloured threads"'.[17] Mona shares this anecdote with her Scottish friend Doris, who worships Mona and wants to join the ranks of women in medicine but whose father won't permit her to do so. Their intimate conversations allow the narrator to provide a student's insider view without judgement. The example of the Irish student leads Mona to compare girls '"doing crewel-work, or painting milking-stools"' to those studying the human body. In neither instance, she argues, do the workers '"incessantly [think] of the source of their materials"'.[18] Todd balances this objective view with the reality Mona also admits, that '"[b]efore one really gets into the work it is worse than ghastly, it is awful"'.[19] She does not deny that students use human cadavers. Instead of sensationalizing the work, however, Mona argues that the anatomy is '"sometimes commonplace, sometimes enthralling"' but will never cause her to grow '"hardened"', something she also implies about her female colleagues.[20]

Sir Douglas is often the mouthpiece for this widely held concern about women in medicine, but Todd develops ethical female characters in striking contrast to male students like Fettes and Macfarlane, in 'The Body Snatcher', Knox's assistants who knowingly accept murdered bodies. Stevenson's narrator calls Macfarlane 'clever, dissipated, and unscrupulous to the last degree', while Fettes serves as a cautionary figure for students who desire accolades from teachers and, due to moral weakness, take misstep after misstep.[21] Macfarlane's dismissive comment about why Knox chose the two as assistants also ironically suggests women might serve a more principled role: '"he didn't want old wives"'.[22].

The most thorough demystification of dissection unfolds in volume three, when a London dissecting room becomes the backdrop for friendly female chat about anatomy, exams, and the future of professional women. The narrator humorously anticipates a reader 'with a taste for horrors' turning to this chapter, enticingly entitled 'The Dissecting-Room'.[23] The surprise, however, lies in the absence of violence, body snatching, sordid secrets, or titillating naked bodies. While the first paragraph invites a curious reader into a hushed, almost deserted room, the 'screams' that break the silence turn out to be a pet parrot, 'the cry' is the 'cats'-meat-man in the street', and the only mystery is a student figuring out 'Meckel's ganglion', a branch of the facial nerve.[24] Instead of sensation, therefore, Todd provides a grounded view of women at work comparing surgical techniques, using proper anatomical terms, debating how they will pass exams, and, realistically, engaging in gossip. She also provides respectful anonymity to the specimens being studied, referring to body parts by scientific names, thus mimicking the method of students. Likewise, the narrator assigns anonymity to those in the act of dissection, referring to 'the dissector of Meckel's ganglion' or 'the investigator of the internal iliac'.[25] By blurring the identity of both the dissected and dissectors, the narrative refocuses attention on the importance of the work while distancing questions of gender. Readers often comment favorably about this chapter, and one reviewer confirms the author's accuracy as well: 'We are assured by one who has gone the course with Mona that the medical parts of the book—the Gower Street dissecting-room, girl-doctors-over-the-fire scenes—are well done. Any lay reader can see they are done for a purpose: to prove Sir Douglas in the wrong, and to assert the superiority of such a nature as Mona's over the experience of the dissecting-room.[26] Mona Maclean and her colleagues in

this contemporary scene in London serve as role models for universities in Glasgow and Edinburgh, poised to accept women in 1892.

The Scottish setting further enhances Mona's educational and professional development and suggests an optimistic future for women, as both patients and practitioners.[27] First, Scotland is where Mona experiences the profound self-understanding that '[w]e need many initiations into a life-work that is really to move mankind', as the narrator explains.[28] Her initiations in Scotland begin with her humble shop work, which provides Mona a chance to teach young women about appropriate choices (from hats, to literature and male companionship), and continues through forays in the countryside, conversations with local Scots, and a budding romance with a male medical student. Her epiphany that study and science must be paired with powerful inspiration occurs, however, after she nurses Maggie. A 'half-starved' unwed 'girl', Maggie returns to Borrowness to deliver her infant, after being seduced in Edinburgh.[29] One of Todd's main points is that patients like Maggie need women doctors, a point even more poignantly made when a local servant whose illness is beyond medical intervention requests Mona's advice, refusing to see a male doctor. Second, characters speaking Scots carry deep emotional appeal and voice memorable, credible views from which Mona learns, from Maggie to Mona's Auntie Bell, whom Jex-Blake declares 'delightful', 'with her racy Scotch and her quaint humour'.[30] Together, the Fifeshire experiences require Mona's 'self-discipline' and are both 'admirable' and 'true to life', as one reviewer claims.[31] Edinburgh, on the other hand, presents more peril for women, like the seduced Maggie or young girl in Bible-class, who, Doris explains, lost '"her bloom"' as a result of being violated by young male medics at the Infirmary during '"routine treatment"'.[32] Finally, Mona falls in love while in Fifeshire, and although she returns to London to study and pass her exams, she marries a fellow Scot, who wooed her in Scotland, and with whom she sets up medical practice.

Read in tandem with Doyle's cases in Sherlock Holmes or *Round the Red Lamp* and Stevenson's 'The Body Snatcher' or *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Mona Maclean Medical Student* suggests a more egalitarian, hopeful case for women, and the future of Scotland, published at a time the number of registered medical students in England, Scotland, and Ireland was the highest it had ever

been.[33] Mona recognizes this shift and the need for excellent women in the field, as well as the challenges they faced, when she tells a fellow student '"the supply of medical women will exceed the demand in the next ten years [...] but at present, if a woman is to succeed, she must be better than the average man"'.[34] By volume three, Todd also emphasizes that 'medical work is the natural right and duty of the sex', as the narrator explains Mona's desire to return to school.[35] Her novel ends on a note of hope, as Mona's husband Ralph tells her '"here is a case for you"', after a young woman enters and bursts into 'hysterical tears', rather than confide in him.[36] Well-trained, with consulting rooms side by side, Mona and Ralph offer valuable options to each patient who enters their practice, regardless of gender or situation. Perhaps most importantly, in the many relationships she develops throughout her novel, the first to explore the perspective of a female medical student, Todd provides voice to and mentorship for young Scottish women, repositioning female physicians as articulate, apt professionals.[37]Published eight years after Robert Louis Stevenson's 'The Body Snatcher' (1884) and two years before Arthur Conan Doyle's anthology of medical stories *Round the Red Lamp* (1894), Margaret Todd's *Mona Maclean Medical Student: A Novel* (1892) highlights similar medical topics yet evinces a strikingly different female sensibility in relation to training and physician-patient relationships. One of the first students at the Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women, Todd was actually in medical school while she wrote and published her novel under the pseudonym Graham Travers.[38] Like other women writing fin-de-siècle fiction, she was attuned to female experience and explored gender roles, particularly linked to education. In contrast to many New Women authors, though, Todd eschewed the late-century trend toward short fiction, perhaps because the sustained length of the three-volume novel provided the narrative space to introduce and resolve a number of divisive issues that evoke debate amongst characters. Todd is not heavy-handed in her message of female empowerment, however. In her engaging *Bildungsroman*, she explores dilemmas as her protagonist counsels those she mentors. Likewise, Mona Maclean learns from friends, family, and teachers. One memorable physician, Dr. Alice Bateson, reflects Sophia Jex-Blake, with whom Todd had a professional and personal relationship.[39] Mining personal experience to explore two issues that would have resonated with contemporary readers in Scotland—dissection by women, in

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(c) The Bottle Imp