

Women Like That: Reclaiming Mary Diana Dods

In 1825, Mary Shelley, the well-known author of *Frankenstein*, had a dear friend staying with her in London for a time. Mary Diana Dods, called Doddy by her friends, was by all accounts a bizarre creature. Contemporaries describe her as having grotesque features and a misshapen, out-of-proportion body. She almost looked like a man in a poorly fitted dress at first glance, and in one respect she was a man: she had published several books and many stories using the name David Lyndsay. It was hard for her contemporaries not to laugh at Doddy, but her critics were quickly won over by her wit and charm.

At about the same time, another friend came into Mary Shelley's circle, the very young and beautiful Isabella Robinson. Isabella was sixteen, the daughter of friends of friends. Mary was a widow of 27 or 28 at the time, learned and well trav-

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eled. Doddy was a little older, also well educated and intelligent, while Isabella had little to offer beyond her extraordinary beauty. Nonetheless, the three women formed an intense, close bond.

The next spring found Isabella pregnant and unmarried and living with Doddy. Two unmarried women living together in the 1820s was a rare but not unheard-of situation. One or both had to have an independent means of support. The Victorian age was closing in on England, and the only careers open to upper-class women were those of wife and mother, in that order. Doddy had seen some success as a writer, but only under a male pseudonym. Mary Shelley was herself an oddity for being a successful woman writer using her own name.

It is hard to know the exact nature of Isabella's and Doddy's rela-



tionship, but their arrangement of living together was marriage-like in that they pooled their resources and set up housekeeping together, for better or worse.

That spring, none of the three friends had much in the way of funds. Isabella may have had a small allowance from her father, but Doddy had not published anything for several years. Mary relied on what she made as a writer, and a small, unreliable allowance from her father-in-law. She borrowed ten pounds from a friend so that she and Isabella could leave London for Kent. Isabella began to call herself "Mrs. Douglas" whose "husband" was away on business in London.

Mary did all she could for the little family. She nursed Isabella through a post-partum illness and wrote to her publisher urging him to publish some of David Lyndsay's work. She remained a staunch and supportive friend when the death of Doddy's father left them uncertain about their financial future.

Doddy and her sister Georgiana were the 'reputed' daughters of a Scottish earl. The sisters had been raised and educated as aristocrats, but were kept out of sight. Doddy was not close to her father, but there was hope that he had remembered them in his will. When, in the summer of 1827, the will was read, Doddy and her widowed sister were each to receive 100 pounds a year, free and clear of any debtors or husbands.

Now Mary, Doddy and Isabella began to formulate another scheme. Mary wrote to a friend that, much to Isabella's relief, Doddy was "seriously considering *les culottes*," meaning trousers. In the fall Mary wrote to another friend in London, J.H. Payne, asking him to go to the passport office in London and obtain passports for her friends, Walter Sholto Douglas and his wife Isabella Douglas. She enclosed samples of both signatures and a description of the couple in the letter. Payne's job was to find a woman who matched Isabella's description, impersonate the

Douglases at the passport office and forge their signatures. Payne obliged, thinking it was only to save Mary and the Douglases the time and expense of traveling to London.

Several months later, Walter Douglas (Doddy) with his wife Isabella, baby daughter Adeline, and sister Georgiana left England for Paris, where nobody knew them. When Doddy put on those trousers, she became as much a man as any other of the period: she was the head of the household, her sister deferred to her as a brother, and the baby called her papa. Dods/Douglas could speak and write as the educated person s/he was without being considered a freak. He and Isabella were regarded as a couple — though not a very compatible one, for the relationship was always stormy.

In the Spring of 1828, Mary went to Paris with Isabella's father and sister to visit the Douglases for a month. She observed Isabella's "matchless suffering" in the marriage. "One only trusts that the diseased body acts on the diseased mind," Mary wrote about Doddy, who had a long history of liver ailments. Other accounts by those who knew the Douglases in Paris, and who were less bedazzled by Isabella than Mary was, depicted a very young and flirtatious beauty married to an older, ugly, and unwell man. She flirted openly with other men, arousing her husband's jealousy.

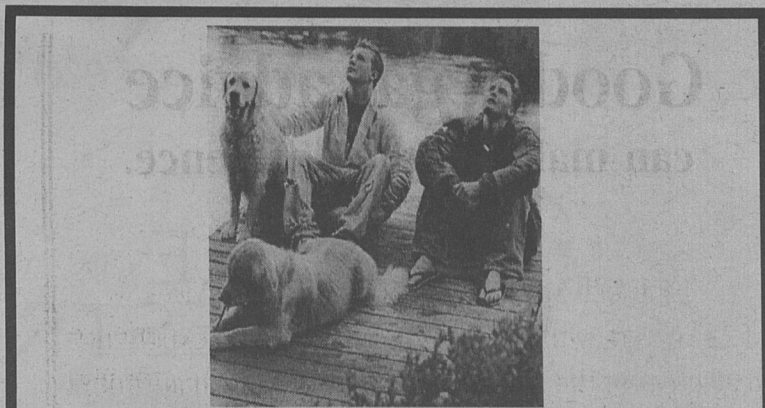
In November of 1829, Dods/Douglas was thrown into debtors' prison and may have died there. It is the last mention of David Lyndsay, Walter Douglas or Mary Diana Dods anywhere. A year later, Isabella returned to England without Douglas. Mary found her friend much changed in the two-and-a-half years since they'd last seen each other — since Isabella had no more use for Mary. "She surely is not the being she once was," Mary wrote, and she could have just as well written the same about Doddy. ▼

For more details:

Mary Diana Dods; A Gentleman and a Scholar, by Betty T. Bennett, William Morrow and Company, 1991.

The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, volumes I and II, ed. Betty T. Bennett, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

Francesca Susanna is a lesbian interested in women in history who lives in Burlington. This is her last "Women Like That" column, by her choice, although she will continue to write on other subjects for OITM.



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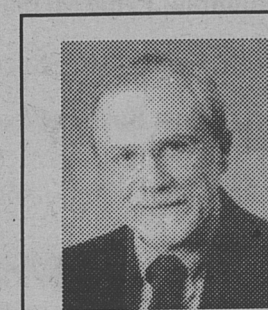
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