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The Mysterious Codebreaker

Edith Rickert (1871-1938) was a misrepresented but influential woman who is most well-known for her work in Medieval Literature, specifically the Chaucer-Life Records, and her rewrite of the Text of Canterbury Tales. She was born in Dover, Ohio, and graduated from Vassar College in 1891 with an A.B. She then went on to earn a Phd in English from the University of Chicago. There are conflicting records of the exact timeline of her professional career after her education. Some facts that are universally known are that she never married, and worked in Europe for a little under ten years, then stayed in the United States after that. In the United States, she worked at Vassar for a little bit, and then the University of Chicago with Professor John Manly, with whom she also worked in Washington D.C as a Cryptographer during World War I. Rickert is decently recognized for her literary works, most of which she wrote during her time abroad, and especially the work she did with Manly on Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales. She comes off as quite a mystery-- it seems that the deeper you dig into her life, the more ambiguous she becomes. She is also tragically misrepresented, and there is a lot of misinformation on her achievements. The only thing she is actually known on her Wikipedia page is her work with Manly-- and she is only recognized there as the partner of a male. She was a brilliantly intelligent woman with immense literary and cryptographical talents that are

overlooked, to put simply, because she was a strong woman in an era where strong women did not exist, especially without the aid of a male counterpart.

From the information that is widely known about her, Rickert's literary work is organized into six categories: Books; Short Stories; Poems; Essays, Memoirs, and Reviews; Articles; and Translations and Works by Others. In her years traveling and studying Medieval literature in England, she constantly wrote and rewrote/made notes on these pieces. When she returned to the United States she worked as a writer in Boston for a few years, and moved to Washington D.C. to work as a Cryptographer for the government during World War I. The details of this period in her life are fuzzy at first glance, but she did meet Manly at this position. From there they developed a close relationship and moved to the University of Chicago where they continued to work for over a decade on two main literary projects, as mentioned before. For years, Rickert's work as a Cryptographer was ignored, and her work at the University of Chicago was only acknowledged because she worked with Manly. There are also many assumptions about her relationship with Manly, as they were both never married, and worked together in close proximity for a lengthy period of time. I found a thesis paper written by a student at the University of Iowa in the 1990's titled "Scandalous Assumptions: Edith Rickert and the Chaucer Project", which details how it was widely accepted that Rickert was only at the University of Chicago because of Manly, and her contributions to their projects didn't count because she was assumed to be romantically involved with him. There is no explicit evidence of any romantic involvement between the two, they only ever speak of each other fondly, but in a professional matter and nothing else. But, sadly, as it is even true nowadays, women can be heavily disregarded when men are involved in a situation.

I was able to find a detailed Youtube video, with only 46 views, by Suzanne Bellamy, who wrote a paper called The CODEBREAKER for the International Virginia Woolf Conference in Chicago in 2014. She was not able to attend the conference and speak on her research, so she uploaded a video explaining her findings instead. Bellamy was doing research of Woolf, and she found a thesis paper at the University of Chicago in 1930 by Elizabeth McKee, supervised by Professor Edith Rickert. After purchasing and reading this thesis, Bellamy realized, the story was not in the paper about Woolf, but in the unearthed world of information about Rickert. Bellamy found, as she worked backwards in her research process, that Rickert surprisingly and interestingly links military intelligence, modern textual analysis, and codebreaking, while managing to be a woman of elusive secrets. McKee states that the methods she used in her Analysis of Mrs. Virginia Woolf were developed by Rickert-- which lead Bellamy to find Rickert's text, "New Methods for the Study of Literature".

In the introduction of this book, Rickert says that she developed these methods from her years of experience in modernist literature, more specifically her role as a codebreaker for military intelligence. This piqued Bellamy's interest even further since she had never heard of this side of her work, only the Chaucer study works. She wondered how this was connected to military intelligence? This lead to Bellamy finding out about the American Black Chamber, which I also scanned through (the annotated version), which exposes the secret diplomacy of the cryptographers that were involved in the first World War. In that book, Yardley, the author, talks about the formation of a group: the MI-8 (Military Intelligence), of which Rickert and Manly were presumably members, and even considered leaders or spearheaders of the cryptographic agency. Their job was to set up ciphers to read the telegrams of foreign governments. This was

the beginning of a great modernist linkage to the surveillance process. Rickert had a long history in textual studies, so she was recruited by Manly because of her skills. Bellamy also notes that there is a lot of speculation about her relationship with Manly, but they were professional partners over anything else.

In the Black Chamber, Yardley says that cryptographers have a certain way of thinking which makes them successful-- these people were called cipher-brains. He said that amongst the thousands that worked for MI-8, there were only a dozen or so cipher-brains, including Manly and Rickert. They had a certain ability to develop and break code, pre-computer, which very few other individuals possessed at that time. Rickert took those skills of textual analysis into her career at the University of Chicago after MI-8, and that was how she was able to develop successful analyzation methods for her students. Though she was not given proper recognition back then, Rickert was mainly responsible for the arrest and prosecution of one of the most famous of the German spies of the first world war, Pablo Waberski, with her use of the Zimmerman cipher. The codes were related to Germany promising Mexico bits of American land like New Mexico and Arizona, in order to keep America out of the war. In theory, the Black Chamber was supposed to be dismantled by the end of the war, but with the release of the Black Chamber text, we learn that it actually wasn't. It morphed from organization to organization, and eventually morphed into the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and National Security Alliance (NSA). Rickert then returned to the University of Chicago and used the tools she learned as a Cryptographer to analyze modernist literature, such as the works of Woolf, for the rest of her career until she passed away in 1938.

After doing my own research, but especially after watching Bellamy's detailed video on her research on Rickert, I believe I have enough information to submit edits on Rickert's Wikipedia page so she is properly documented and recognized. At the base of it, Rickert was an intelligent literaturist and cryptographer, who can be seen as one of the founding members of the CIA and NSA as we know it, and the creator of the concepts of surveillance methods in modern government agencies. It is even more admirable that Rickert worked tireless as a cryptographer in an era where there was no technology like computers-- she toiled on her codebreaking discoveries by hand the entire time. In the past, she has not been separated from her work with Manly, and even her Wikipedia page states that she is most famous for work that is linked to his name. I would like to change that by contacting the NSA to petition to give her proper recognition for the birth of their organization, and also editing her Wikipedia page, which is usually the first source of information people find on the Internet when googling her name.