Power in Lesbian Relationships


"Women Alone Stir My Imagination": Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition

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Everyone wants to know
how it was in the old days
with no sun or moon
in our colorless sky
to warn us
we were not insane, . . .

[Audre Lorde]¹

In literary history, were all things equal, 1928 might be remembered as a banner year for lesbian publishing. In 1928 Virginia Woolf’s Orlando, Radclyffe Hall’s The Well of Loneliness, and Djuna Barnes’s Ladies Almanack were printed. But all things were not equal. Orlando was enthusiastically reviewed and then trivialized and dismissed by all but the expected circles. Hall’s Well was banned in England only to become throughout western civilization the archetype of all things lesbian—the “butch,” the tears, the despair of it all. Djuna Barnes’s frolicsome romp, privately printed for a limited and carefully selected audience, was never seen again until 1972.²


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So most of us lesbians in the 1950s grew up knowing nothing about lesbianism except Stephen Gordon’s swagger, Stephen Gordon’s breeches, and Stephen Gordon’s wonderful way with horses. We suspected that if women were horses Stephen Gordon would have been a happier girl; but that somehow seemed disrespectful.

Now suppose we had read Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* instead. Suppose we had known that Orlando, the timeless androgynous changeling, was in fact Vita Sackville-West, and that upon writing “the longest and most charming love letter in Literature,” Virginia Woolf had gone off to France with her, protected from slander and scandal by generations of aristocratic lineage, family money, and the strengthening power of all the love and friendships in queer old Bloomsbury. Or, just imagine we had read the letters as well—Woolf’s letters to Vita, her sister Vanessa, Dame Ethel Smyth, or Violet Dickinson, for whom she wrote a fantasy of an erotic and nurturing female utopia. Well, to begin with, some of us might never have swaggered. Alternatively, imagine: to have read the *Ladies Almanack* in 1956! Unrequited love, tearful abandonment, the utter curse of it all might never have existed. No self-loathing: just the joyous play of “Saints” and “priestesses” and Dame Musset, “as fine a wench as ever wet bed.” Yet until this decade we knew nothing of the existence of Evangeline Musset/Natalie Clifford Barney, the “One Grand Red Cross for the Pursuance, the Relief and the Distraction of such Girls….” *The Well of Loneliness, Orlando,* and the *Ladies Almanack* all dealt with the rarefied and privileged existence of lesbians of aristocratic mien and means. But only *The Well* denied joy in the positive choice to live with and love women.

Spiritual galaxies from *The Well of Loneliness,* frolicsome romps are not repentent tragedies, however courageous. And so for fifty years the variety of lesbian literature coexisted with the vigorous denial of lesbianism in general and the unending differences in manner and style among lesbian women in particular. Now we did know just a little more. We knew about Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, for example. At least we thought we did because they looked like we should. But nothing explicit Gertrude Stein wrote about loving women was published before her death.

Entirely obscured from view were the many networks, both contemporary and historical, of equalitarian and nurturing friendships among creative and publicly active women. Like the historical denial of women’s history generally, the historical denial of the vast range of women-loving women has not been an accident. With the disappearance of their papers, their writings, their work—a carefully and arduously created record—we lost sight of the communal and noncompetitive intimacy of the settlement-house women, the easy love and support that existed among academic women, and all the variety of women in enduring relationships with each other. In a hostile world in which women are
not supposed to survive except in relation with and in service to men, entire communities of women were simply erased. History tends to bury what it seeks to reject.

Denied access to an accurate historical record, we knew only that our foresisters wore neckties, and committed suicide all over the last pages of the novel. With little to read and practically nothing to wear, we occupied an alien and threatening environment. The cost to women of that historical violence can be measured in the examples of women who, without knowledge or support, named sinful and sick, were in fact driven to suicide, or were deprived of energy and happiness. How many women-loving women subsisted in that lonely interface society called “spinsters,” limited to the role of Victorian aunt, doomed to family service? How many women lost their jobs, the support of their nuclear families? How many women honoring the dictates of a warped, male-managed culture role-played away decades of more individual needs and options and were thereby denied other dimensions of pleasure and satisfaction?

For, in the “old days” things seemed cruelly simple and cruelly stereotypic. Modeled on a culture that celebrated only tough men and fey women, “butch” and “femme,” lesbian culture was not an egalitarian feminist society. Moreover, it existed only at night. In the daytime everybody went to school or to work and looked just like, well—just like you and me. Even in the great cities like New York, “downtown” lesbians met in bars and affluent “uptown” lesbians met in clubs. Most met nowhere at all because the whereabouts of clubs and bars, illegal and frequently raided, were neither publicized nor inviting. Many women thought they were the only lesbians in their communities, maybe even in all human history.

The process of restoring the full range of lesbian options, of woman-loving choices, has begun. The purpose of this article is to analyze the literature and attitudes out of which the present lesbian feminist works have emerged, and to examine the continued denials and invalidation of the lesbian experience. Oddly, the restoration process has to date involved many traps, many distortions, and continued denials; tawdry psychobiographical analyses; and egregious antifeminist trivializations of both the personal and political aspects of some of the most significant women in history. On the other hand, we have just begun to name our own world and to consider the full implications of women’s friendships and the crucial role played by female networks of love and support, the sources of strength that enabled independent, creative, and active women to function.

A survey of recent historical literature and the reprints of works so earnestly obscured begins to reveal the full dimensions of the lesbian reality. The massive Arno reprint series, *Homosexuality: Lesbians and Gay Men in Society, History and Literature,* is a grand contribution to the resto-
ration process. Under the caring general editorship of Jonathan Katz, with Louis Crompton, Barbara Gittings, Dolores Noll, and James Steakley, it includes the entire run of *The Ladder* from 1956 to 1972. Since for so many years the Daughters of Bilitis's journal was the only publication that dealt at all (though in no particular depth) with lesbian literature, history, and culture, it is an essential introductory reference point. It is, moreover, filled with surprises. Several original anthologies collected for this series are notable: "Lesbianism and Feminism in Germany, 1895–1910," consists of untranslated contemporary texts; a volume of eight bibliographies on lesbian literature and male homosexuality; and *Government vs. Homosexuals*, which includes Senators McClellan and McCarthy's *Hearings on Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government*, one of the highlights of the antihomosexual/anticommunist witch hunts of the Eighty-first Congress. The series also includes the extraordinary 1811–12 case of *Miss Marianne Woods and Miss Jane Pirie against Dame Helen Cumming Gordon*. The case that inspired Lillian Hellman's homophobic *Children's Hour* is reproduced in its tragic entirety, including over 160 pages of lurid testimony, 115 pages of petition, a section on the "Practice of Tribadism," a veritable bibliography of ancient and medieval lesbian, and hundreds of pages of judges' speeches on the subject. The judges made so many speeches, Lord Meadowbank explained, because of the gravity of the issue: "for the virtues, the comforts, and the freedom of domestic intercourse, mainly depend on the purity of female manners. . . ."

The biographies included in the Arno series vary widely in style and historical significance. Mary Gordon's *Chase of the Wild Goose: The Story of Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Sarah Ponsonby, Known as the Ladies of Llangollen* (1956), is related as a "tale" but is well illustrated, includes excerpts from letters, and is withal rather delightful. Mary Sturgeon's *Michael Field* (1922) is surprisingly candid (though unfortunately brief) about the relationship of Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who wrote poetry and plays together as Michael Field. These two women deserve a better-researched and fuller study. Mary Casal's *Stone Wall* (1930) is of historical interest to students of the 1920s. It is, however, a dismally written self-portrait in the self-hating Radclyffe Hall tradition. More informative and self-affirming is Mercedes de Acosta's *Here Lies the Heart*, an anecdotal yet detailed and serious memoir. De Acosta was a dedicated suffragist and feminist and a New York playwright and Hollywood screenwriter of note. She knew everybody and writes about them vigor-

3. The series, edited by Jonathan Katz et al. (New York: Arno Press), includes fifty-four books and two periodicals, including the entire run of *The Ladder*. Biographies such as *Mary Gordon's Chase of the Wild Goose: The Story of Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Sarah Ponsonby*; *Mary Sturgeon's Michael Field*; *Mary Casal's Stone Wall*; *Mercedes de Acosta's Here Lies the Heart*; lesbian novels from the 1950s; and classics such as Christa Winsloe's *The Child Manuela*, Françoise Mallet's *The Illusionist*, and *Olivia*. 

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uously, particularly her extraordinary sister Rita de Acosta Lydig, and also Isadora Duncan, Greta Garbo, and Marlene Dietrich.4

Two groups of lesbian novels are included in the Arno series: the paperback originals of the 1950s, best represented by Claire Morgan’s classic The Price of Salt (1952), perhaps the only nonstereotypic novel of the decade, and Ann Bannon’s volumes featuring the 1950s update of Stephen Gordon, the more dazzling and less tragic butch, Beebo Brinker. The other is the European boarding-school genre that dominated lesbian literature before the 1950s. Christa Winsloe’s The Child Manuela (filmed in 1932 as Maedchen in Uniform) is the well-written classic of a schoolgirl’s unrequited love for her teacher that ends in the girl’s punishment and suicide. A protest against Prussian discipline and emergent fascism, Winsloe’s tale remains moving and effective. Anna Elisabet Weirauch’s The Scorpion (translated by Whittaker Chambers, 1932), and The Outcast (1933) are two mauldin volumes filled with suffering and abandonment. Relieved only temporarily by the presence of the dashing and sensual Olga Radó, who commits suicide, Myra’s life is full but unfulfilled. Set in decadent Weimar Berlin, they are books of bourgeois sentimentality. Weirauch’s politics are mixed with a crude mysticism that is half in love with romantic death and utterly contemptuous of life. Françoise Mallet’s The Illusionist (1951) is the most erotic novel of this genre. It is a high school girl’s intense fantasy of all it might have been to be dominated and disciplined, loved, comforted, and controlled when sixteen by father’s beautiful mistress, a hard-riding woman in tight-fitting breeches and “hob-nailed boots” (undoubtedly the result of poor translation), who switches her riding crop at nobody in particular.

The truth is that these passionate little girls were not always abused and abandoned. They did not commit suicide. They wrote books about passionate little girls, death, and abandonment. Olivia (1949) is, for example, the best of the genre. Intelligent, sensitive, and absorbing, Olivia was written anonymously by Dorothy Strachey Bussy, one of the illustrious Bloomsbury Stracheys, better known for her translations of André Gide and others. Olivia was originally published by Virginia and Leonard Woolf’s Hogarth Press and is dedicated “To the beloved memory of V.W.”

Olivia was a learned and loving child whose adolescence is tenderly nurtured by the formidable headmistress Mlle. Julie. Caring and protective, Julie disappoints the exquisitely longing Olivia. Of the night Julie fails to come to her room as promised Olivia writes: “And yet I was to know other, bitterer vigils, during which I looked back on this one as happy—during which I realized she had never loved me, never would love me as well as on that night.”

But, alas, all is in crisis. Because of a love triangle between Julie, her co-headmistress, and a wretched German interloper, Julie leaves her school. Olivia never sees her again. The ending is pure obligatory heartbreak, abandonment, and death. But that is not entirely accurate. Julie was in fact Marie Souvestre, who did in reality leave fashionable Les Ruches, where Natalie Barney and Dorothy Strachey Bussy were educated. But she opened Allenswood, an English school near Wimbledon Common, where Eleanor Roosevelt (who figures in this novel) and the younger Strachey daughters were educated and where, a happier fact, Dorothy Strachey taught Shakespeare.5

The writing of Olivia, which “occupied this idle, empty winter” of Dorothy Strachey Bussy’s eighty-third year, exemplifies the difficulties of recapturing the historical truth of the lesbian experience. Dorothy Strachey Bussy wrote that Olivia “was written to please myself, . . . without considering whether I shock or hurt the living, without scrupling to speak of the dead.” She concludes her introduction by noting that in order to recapture those feelings of that year when she was sixteen it was necessary to overthrow “the psychologists, the psycho-analysts, the Prousts and the Freuds”—all of whom had laid “in ambush” to “poison the sources of emotion,” “to give it its name,” and to apply their “poisonous antidotes” to the romantic realities of life. “Love has always been the chief business of my life,” she wrote, “and I don’t pretend that this experience was not succeeded by others.” But at eighty-three Dorothy Strachey Bussy “felt the urgency of confession,” the need to assail and stand up to those elements of her culture that had caused her to hide, that had kept her “from any form of unveiling, which has forbidden me many of the purest physical pleasures and all literary expression.” Bussy, who died in 1960 at the age of ninety-four, clearly deserves her own biography.

One hopes that such a book will have more depth, understanding, and empathy than those now being published about her Bloomsbury compatriots. While we may be grateful that the full range of the work and the generally ambisexual nature of these artful notables are finally being brought into view, the Bloomsbury corpus is to date uneven. The best works are by and about the Bloomsbury men, highlighted by Michael Holroyd’s biography of Lytton Strachey. The rash of recent books about Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, largely written by their male relatives and friends, are of varying intensity and uneven insight.

No adequate biography of Vita Sackville-West exists. Nigel Nicolson’s Portrait of a Marriage tells much about his mother, and much less about his father, Harold Nicolson.6 Though written with love, under-

5. For an account of Marie Souvestre’s relationship with first Lady Strachey and then her children, particularly Lytton and Dorothy, see Michael Holroyd, Lytton Strachey, vol. 1 (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1967).
standing, and frequently pride, it occasionally resembles a complaining letter from an irate son whose mother was too often removed. Harold Nicolson, whose absences were more lengthy, fares much better. Michael Stevens's V. Sackville-West, though well researched, is condescending.  

Quentin Bell, Virginia Woolf's nephew and curator, provides the most detailed outline of Woolf's life. His biography is a guide, a crucial companion piece to her letters, journals, and published writings. It is, however, written with the kind of attempt at professorial objectivity that obscures Virginia Woolf's passionate daring and the nature of her politics. The emerging availability of her letters and diaries, meticulously edited by Nigel Nicolson, Anne Olivier Bell, Quentin Bell, and Joanne Trautmann (the author of The Jessamy Brides: The Friendship of Virginia Woolf and V. Sackville-West) provides an invaluable corrective to the prevailing interpretations of Woolf's life offered by some of the sons of Bloomsbury.  

An example is John Lehmann's Virginia Woolf and Her World. Capitalizing on Virginia Woolf's popularity, the book is really dedicated to the male world of Bloomsbury. The women of Bloomsbury are trivialized and occasionally ridiculed. This is a picture book without pictures of such women as Violet Dickinson and Madge Vaughan, and lengthy assurances to dear reader that "Virginia's passions for Madge Vaughan and Violet Dickinson cannot have been anything but 'pure.'" Lehmann knows that is so because "Virginia showed every sign of being sexually retarded," the result of her half-brother's "alleged" molestations. Lehmann dismisses young George Duckworth's unwanted "fondlings" as youthful caprice. After all, he "eventually married" and behaved toward Virginia "in later years as a model friend and affectionate brother." Now that we have Virginia Woolf's letters and diary entries regarding George and Gerald Duckworth we can appreciate the intensity of the misleading bias here. Woolf never forgave the Duckworth brothers. She hated them and avoided their company. Lehmann, in fact, resembles Professor von X., who, in A Room of One's Own, writes knowingly, arrogantly about women—revealing in every word his appropriate place among the woman-despisers of the world.

Virginia Woolf's feminism was grounded in her recognition that "we think back through our mothers if we are women." Elizabeth French Boyd's Bloomsbury Heritage: Their Mothers and Their Aunts reflects that

conviction. The short sketches of these strong creative women, some of whom (like Jane Maria Grant, Lady Strachey) were ardent suffragists and all of whom led vigorous and compelling lives, give us a sense of the proud legacy left to their daughters. In a forthcoming collection of feminist essays on Virginia Woolf, "Thinking Back through Our Mothers," Jane Marcus asks, "why has so little attention been paid to the social criticism, the sexual politics of Woolf's novels?" The answer is, of course, that it requires a profoundly feminist and woman-loving sensibility to deal with a woman like Woolf who asserted that "women alone stir my imagination."

Lacking that sensibility, the work of the sons of Bloomsbury is marred. Nigel Nicolson and Quentin Bell emphasize Woolf's insanity, allege her sexual frigidity. They classify her an elitist, unable to overcome an aristocratic contempt for the laboring classes. They insist that the politics of her later years was ill-informed, naive, and positively dangerous to the realm in wartime. Yet to read through Woolf's letters and diaries, edited with such skill, care, and painstaking purpose, is to see much more, and to see very differently. It is not to see in vivid detail the abiding anguish of Virginia Woolf's life: against a male-defined world that denied her access to the Cambridge education reserved for her brothers; against a male-defined world that sat in judgment, as it continues to sit, upon her every vision, her every word. Woolf continually struggled to be free of her concern for censorious male critics. But she never entirely managed that freedom. The integrity of her art prevailed at great cost to her emotional equanimity, rendering every line a potential agony: "The consciousness of what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist's state of unconsciousness. She could write no longer." Thus women are at every turn "impeded by the extreme conventionality of the other sex."

Without 500 guineas and a room of one's own, women could not acquire "the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think." That was the great challenge. And, Woolf believed, women could best achieve that freedom in a woman's community, a woman's republic. Protected by and connected with other women, such a republic might emerge from the power of what Jane Marcus calls "the fertile and promiscuous Mother Tongue." Woolf believed in that power: "Words are dangerous things let us remember. A republic might be brought into being by a poem."

12. Jane Marcus, "Thinking Back through Our Mothers" (unpublished typescript), p. 15. I am grateful to Adrienne Rich for this material, and for other assistance throughout this essay.
13. Ibid.
Because of the disparity between Virginia Woolf's own words, the fact of her changing sensibilities over time, and the prevailing interpretation of the meaning of her words, feminists may want to read every newly available letter and journal entry to decide for themselves such questions as whether or not Woolf was an elitist aristocrat or a socialist, asexual or woman-loving. Some examples of that disparity are genuinely startling. Having reluctantly accepted the reality of Virginia Woolf's lesbian friendship with Vita Sackville-West, for example, Quentin Bell explains that they could not have been very satisfying relations. He concludes: "There may have been—on balance I think that there probably was—some caressing, some bedding together. But whatever may have occurred between them of this nature, I doubt very much whether it was of a kind to excite Virginia or to satisfy Vita. As far as Virginia's life is concerned the point is of no great importance; what was, to her, important was the extent to which she was emotionally involved, the degree to which she was in love. One cannot give a straight answer to such questions but, if the test of passion be blindness, then her affections were not very deeply engaged."\(^{15}\)

Now in whose world is the test of love, or passion, "blindness"? Few women I think will recognize as familiar even the idea of such a test. Virginia Woolf was certainly not blind to Vita's limitations. She knew that she wrote with "complete competency," but with "a pen of brass." They criticized each other's work easily, with encouragement and love. Woolf saw her clearly, and she delighted in what she saw. Virginia Woolf's journal record, removed from Quentin Bell's interpretation, presents an entirely different emphasis: "I like her and being with her and the splendour—she shines in the grocer's shop in Sevenoaks with a candlelit radiance, stalking on legs like beech trees, pink glowing, grape clustered, pearl hung. . . . What is the effect of all this on me? Very mixed. There is her maturity and full-breastedness; her being so much in full sail on the high tides, where I am coasting down backwaters. . . . Then there is some voluptuousness about her; the grapes are ripe; and not reflective. . . ."\(^{16}\)

For almost every interpretation of Quentin Bell we have a possible alternative in Virginia Woolf's own words. Bell contends that Vita loved Virginia "much as a man might have loved her, with a masculine impatience. . . ." Woolf's words are just as specific: "These Sapphists LOVE women; friendship is never untinged with amorosity." Vita's love for her enabled Woolf to suspend her usual "fears and refrainings . . ., my usual self-consciousness in intercourse with people who mayn't want me and so on—." Because of Vita, and Orlando, Virginia "wound up this wounded and stricken year in great style." And it was not because of her

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love for, as Bell insists, a man manqué. It was because Vita "so lavishes on me the maternal protection which, for some reason, is what I have always most wished from everyone," from Leonard, her sister Vanessa, and all her friends from Violet Dickinson to Dame Ethel Smyth. We have only begun to explore the implications of the maternal, nurturing origins of our woman-loving. Such stirring and generative work as Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976) and Clare Coss's poetry on the mother-daughter relationship, excerpts of which appeared in *Chrysalis* (no. 5), represents that exploration.¹⁷

Quentin Bell may insist that Virginia Woolf’s friendship with Vita Sackville-West involved neither love nor lust. But Woolf insisted very specifically that it involved both. In a letter to Vanessa she wrote: "Vita is now arriving to spend 2 nights alone with me. . . . I say no more; as you are bored by Vita, bored by love, bored by me, and everything to do with me. . . . Still, the June nights are long and warm; the roses flowering; and the garden full of lust and bees, mingling on the asparagus beds."¹⁸

Are we seriously meant to regard as coldly dispassionate these few examples of the myriad letters to Vita Sackville-West? "Look here Vita—throw over your man, and we'll go to Hampton Court and dine on the river together and walk in the garden in the moonlight and come home late and have a bottle of wine and get tipsy, and I'll tell you all the things I have in my head. . . . They won't stir by day, only by dark on the river. Think of that. Throw over your man, I say, and come" (n.d., 1927). Or in a different mood, and evidently with good reason for jealousy: "Yes you are an agile animal—no doubt about it, but as to your gambols being diverting . . . I'm not so sure. Bad, wicked beast! To think of sporting with oysters—lethargic glucous lipped oysters, lewd lascivious oysters, stationary cold oysters,—to think of it, I say. . . . At the same time, there were the mushrooms: the crab: the bed; the log fire: All shall be credited to you. I'm a fair minded woman. You only be a careful dolphin in your gambolling, or you'll find Virginia's soft crevices lined with hooks!" (July 4, 1927). In addition, a puzzling letter raises more questions about familial happiness and harmony than have so far been answered:

My dear Mrs. Nicolson,

I can't tell you how I enjoyed myself on Sunday. It was so good of you and your husband to let me come. And what a lovely garden! . . . And I still have some of your lovely flowers to remind me of the happy time I had with you, and your husband, to whom please give my best thanks and remembrances, and with much love to you both,


I am. There, you ramshackle old Corkscrew, is that the kind of thing you like? I suppose so.

Honey dearest, don't go to Egypt please. Stay in England. Love Virginia. Take her in your arms... [July 18, 1927] 19

Quentin Bell may believe that Virginia Woolf "appeared as an angular, remote, odd, perhaps rather intimidating figure, a fragile middle-aged poetess, a sexless Sappho... a distressed gentlewoman..." 20 Though he granted the "picture requires some qualifications," feminists may decide to dismiss it entirely.

Feminists, after all, see with different sensibilities, and we begin with different interests and questions. We seek, in fact, a different vocabulary. Of what use to us is the phrase "a sexless Sappho"? How does that concept possibly relate to Virginia Woolf, who wrote to Violet Dickinson in July 1903, "It is astonishing what depths—hot volcano depths—your finger has stirred in Sparroy..." 21

Nicolson thought Violet Dickinson at 6'2" "gawky, even graceless." 22 Virginia Woolf considered her lovely and stirring. It is a matter, presumably, of taste. In November 1906 she wrote Dickinson: "Now what news is there to break the day upon?... Shall we say Love? If you could put your hand in that nest of fur where my heart beats you would feel the thump of the steadiest organ in London—all beating for my Violet. Sometimes, when I am ordering dinner, or emptying—a flower vase—a great tide runs from my toe to my crown, which is the thought of you. ... Now then will you believe that I am devoted to every hair, and every ridge and every hollow, and every spot upon your body..." 23

Most of Woolf's correspondence was with women. And it was with women that she fell in love. Virginia Woolf's commitment to women, politically and personally, may be trivialized by the men in her life; they may delight in her frequently quoted quip that at seventy-one Dame Ethel Smyth had "fallen in love with me... It is like being caught by a giant crab." 24 But it was to Dame Ethel that Woolf wrote in 1950: "It is true that I only want to show off to women. Women alone stir my imagination."

While the Woolf-Smyth letters have not yet been published, those who have seen them remark at their quantity and intensity. Quentin Bell notes that Virginia Woolf thought of Dame Ethel as "a game old cock." He gives us a chronology of their stormy relationship, emphasizing their

19. The 1927 letters are all published in ibid., pp. 395, 395, 397. I am grateful to Michelle Cliff for this reference and for other assistance throughout this essay.
22. Nigel Nicolson, introduction to ibid., p. xviii.
23. Woolf to Dickinson, November 15, 1906, ibid., pp. 244-45.
24. For Bell on Dame Ethel Smyth, see Bell, 2:151-54.
quarrels and crises. We get no glimpse at all of the affection, admiration, and fun the two women shared.

Quentin Bell notes that after Dame Ethel spent a night at Rodmell in 1930, Woolf wrote in her journal of "this curious unnatural friendship. I say unnatural because she is so old, and everything is incongruous." He tells us nothing about why Virginia Woolf was drawn to Smyth. In her own writings, however, Woolf is very explicit about what she admired. In a 1931 speech reprinted in The Pargiters, Woolf describes Dame Ethel's dashing strength, her courage, her superb humor. Addressing the London Society for Women's Service, a group of professional women—engineers, barristers, architects—she distinguishes between her profession and theirs: "Owing to the cheapness of writing paper, and the fact that pens scarcely make any noise," women writers have had years of success. "But for you it is different... You have no Sappho, no Jane Austen to fall back upon. You must be the Sappho and the Jane Austen of your profession. Therefore, you will meet with much more ridicule..." But, Woolf concluded, there is a new spirit in the house of Man—"a very queer spirit—I don't know how to define it—it is the sort of a spirit that is in Dame Ethel Smyth—you have only to look at her and you will feel it for yourselves—and this spirit of adventure and daring is impossible to lock up—or to lock out..."25

Nor is any mention made of the fact that Woolf’s friendship with Smyth, a formidable crusader for women’s rights, coincided with a new level of uncompromising militancy in her own work. The writings of the last decade of Woolf’s life were devoted to Dame Ethel, the creation of a woman’s community, unflinching pacifism, and the affirmation of socialism. When she urged women to analyze the patriarchal origins of fascism and to continue to oppose the fascist patriarchs in their own homes (Three Guineas), her arguments were dismissed as self-serving and dangerous. While few took her pacifism seriously, her essays for the Daily Worker were criticized by some communists as insufficiently Marxist, while others courted her for the sincerity of her anticapitalist, anti-imperialist stand. All such differences notwithstanding, Woolf’s socialist-feminist activities during this period seem remote indeed from Quentin Bell’s insistence on Woolf’s elitist contempt for the working classes.26


26. Berenice A. Carroll’s superb article, “To Crush Him in Our Own Country: The Political Thought of Virginia Woolf” (Feminist Studies 4 [February 1978]: 99-131), is the first significant analysis of Woolf’s political vision. Phyllis Rose’s Woman of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), which arrived too late for inclusion in this essay, also revises the standard understanding. There is not yet any full analysis, however, of Woolf’s race and class attitudes as they change over time.
Virginia Woolf’s entire life is reflected in her work, and demonstrates her conviction that “the public and private worlds are inseparably connected; and the tyrannies and servilities of one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other.” It may seem amazing that so many women of my generation are reading Virginia Woolf today for the first time. But of course it is not at all amazing. She understood that the freedom—personal, economic, and political—to which we aspire connects our work with passion to all our human relations. We were told, on the other hand, that she was a mad, virginal Victorian spinster-wife, precious and elitist. And so we were denied access to the most eloquent creator of a woman-loving socialist feminist vision of the early twentieth century.

It was, I think, no accident that Gertrude Stein, for example, was far more available to us. Nor was it particularly Stein’s work but herself that was adopted as the acknowledged lesbian model by male literary society. Her coded cows and caesars and all the play are still hardly available to us. But Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, the lesbian couple, represent something else. Heterosexual society is little threatened by a relationship that appeared so culturally determined. Stein wrote and slept while Toklas cooked, embroidered, and typed. Few feminist principles are evident there to challenge the ruling scheme of things. Then there is the matter of Stein’s politics. And her politics, though not simple, seem on balance simply impoverished. Stein was not a radical feminist. She was Jewish and anti-Semitic, lesbian and contemptuous of women, ignorant about economics and hostile toward socialism.

This is what Linda Simon’s recent biography of Alice B. Toklas tells us. Oddly this first biography of Toklas focuses largely on Gertrude Stein’s writings, including the complex sexual codes of frolicsome Cows and Caesars. They, however, are for some unexplained reason relegated to an appendix, and no effort has been made to relate the details of the Stein-Toklas relationship they reveal to the text. But Simon’s book is full and usable. We learn that Toklas in California owned and rode horses, never had any intention of marrying a man, had many friends and several lovers before Stein, and went—so Simon tells us—with considerable ease from serving her widowed father’s complicated and extended family home to running Stein’s. The book is full of gossip and tidbits. We learn more about the relationship between Stein and Hemingway (“Gertrude Stein and me were just like brothers”). We learn that even the historian Bryher, Hilda Doolittle’s companion, when accompanying her husband of convenience Robert McAlmon was, in the manner of wives, shunted away from Stein’s conversations and “took refuge at Alice’s side,” presumably in the kitchen. Unfortunately, Linda Simon uses heterosexual language to some extent as Stein did. And Stein’s is the

kind of language from which lesbian feminists and feminist wives will recoil.

The most congenial book about Stein and Toklas to date is *Dear Sammy*. A slender, unpretentious volume of letters to Samuel Steward, preceded by a jaunty and intimate memoir, *Dear Sammy* is filled with personal detail and offers a necessary corrective to our understanding of the Stein-Toklas relationship. Steward presents Toklas as thoroughly independent, creative, vigorous, and self-defined. We learn trifling things like the fact that Stein was hard of hearing and that Toklas incessantly filed her nails. And we learn more about how politically reactionary Stein and Toklas actually were. There is an extraordinary glimpse of Henry Luce and Clare Boothe Luce in Europe just prior to World War II, for example, and an alternative version of the reason for Hemingway’s split with Stein. Not only were they sexually attracted to each other, which Toklas would not tolerate, Steward tells us, but Hemingway got so drunk he had to be thrown out bodily. His vow to “get even” resulted in that interminably quoted portrait of cruel Toklas and quivering obedient Stein in *A Moveable Feast*.

However we may interpret the Stein-Toklas relationship, “in the old days” we knew nothing about their affection and their joy. We knew nothing about the depth of the love they shared. Our only picture of lesbian love was the one presented by Radclyffe Hall, and that was joyless. Turgid and maudlin, *The Well of Loneliness* was judged shameful and corrupting and banned as obscenity in England. Such women-loving women as Vera Brittain and Virginia Woolf rallied to the defense of the author and the subject, while they disparaged the book for its hopeless stereotypes and tragic emphasis. Translated almost immediately into fourteen languages and thoroughly available in the United States and France, it remained for decades the standard self-pitying fare on the subject of what Hall called “God’s Good People.”

All Bloomsbury defended Hall’s book once it was banned. Their defense was not without misgivings, however. On August 30, 1928, Virginia Woolf wrote to Vita Sackville-West:

> For many days I have been so diseased by society. . . . What has caused this irruption I scarcely know—largely your friend Radclyffe Hall (she is now docked of her Miss owing to her proclivities) they banded her book; and so Leonard and Morgan Forster began to get up a protest, and soon we were telephoning and interviewing and collecting signatures—not yours, for YOUR proclivities are too well known. In the midst of this, Morgan goes to see Radclyffe . . . and Radclyffe scolds him like a fishwife, and says that she won’t have any letter written about her book unless it mentions the fact that it is a

work of artistic merit—even genius. And no one has read her book; or can read it.... So our ardour in the cause of freedom of speech gradually cools, and instead of offering to reprint the masterpiece, we are already beginning to wish it unwritten.

Upon reading the book, Virginia Woolf wrote to Lady Ottoline Morrell in November 1928 that she intended to appear in the witness box on behalf of *The Well*, "and have already wasted hours reading it and talking about it.... The dullness of the book is such that any indecency may lurk there—one simply can’t keep one’s eyes on the page—."

The case forced the Bloomsbury closet to deal directly with its own swinging doors, and to keep them tightly shut. As open as Bloomsburyites were with each other, they all seemed troubled that Woolf in court might reveal too much to the public. On November 1, Virginia wrote to Quentin Bell:

At this moment our thoughts centre upon Sapphism—we have to uphold the morality of that Well of all that’s stagnant and lukewarm and neither one thing or the other.... I’m just off to a tea party to discuss our evidence. Leonard and Nessa say I mustn’t go into the box, because I should cast a shadow over Bloomsbury. Forgetting where I was I should speak the truth. All London, they say is agog with this. Most of our friends are trying to evade the witness box; for reasons you may guess. But they generally put it down to the weak heart of a father, or a cousin who is about to have twins....

Ultimately the judge permitted no witnesses to appear, mandating silence on the subject in England for the next thirty years. The obscenity trial had been demanded by the editor of the London *Sunday Express*, who declared that he "would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel." It was time, he insisted, that British society accept "a disagreeable task which it has hitherto shirked, the task of cleaning itself from the leprosy of these lepers, and making the air clean and wholesome once more."

The emotionalism of the trial understandably obscured feminist criticism of the novel. And there was feminist criticism of the novel in 1928. Vera Brittain, for example, reviewed *The Well for Time and Tide*. While she applauded Hall’s “dignified challenge” to “persecution and disgusted ostracism,” she deplored Hall’s distorting “over-emphasis of sex characteristics that rendered her ‘normal’ women clinging and feminine to exasperation” and confused “what is ‘male’ or ‘female’ and what is merely human in our complex make-up.”


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Brittain, and the women of Bloomsbury and Paris, style and preference were a matter of choice and desire.

Although Radclyffe Hall had written an earlier novel, The Unlit Lamp (1924), which was far less stereotypic, her reading of such woman-hating and homophobic sex theorists as Kraft-Ebbing influenced and severely limited her range of options, which she apparently distorted to fit the prevailing medical and psychoanalytic mold. There is to date nothing adequate written about Radclyffe Hall, about her life or her passionate and courageous struggle. Lady Una Troubridge’s self-serving memoir, reprinted in the Arno series, remains the only sympathetic introduction to Hall.32

A coarse and ignoble, indeed, a puerile and hateful life of Radclyffe Hall at the Well of Loneliness has been written by Lovat Dickson.33 For no evident reason other than his position as a publishing-house director, Troubridge appointed Dickson heir of her papers, heir of the literary rights to Hall’s work, and joint executor of her estate. While she willed her money to the Order of the Poor Clares, she willed to Dickson a file of letters, nineteen volumes of diaries, other papers, and Hall’s copyrights—urging him to write a book. His book is an atrocity, and for it he inherited what he modestly refers to as “a valuable literary property.” All royalties to The Well, a book that cost Hall so dearly in physical health and mental anguish, now go to a man who despises her “deviant,” “pathological,” and “unnatural union.”

Dickson defines a lesbian as “more man than girl,” and insists on separating physical sex from all emotional feeling. Poet Audre Lorde has recently referred to this truly unnatural separation of love from physical sensation as that which distinguishes the erotic interests of women from the pornographic queries of men.34 Mean-minded and boorish, Dickson has indeed written an example of dehumanizing pornography. Ill-informed and lurid, it is also dangerous. It becomes dangerous when Dickson purposefully distorts Lady Una’s relationship with her daughter Andrea to whip up societal hatred against lesbian mothers.

Reflecting a far more self-affirming environment, the rediscovery of Natalie Barney, Romaine Brooks, Renée Vivien, Djuna Barnes, and their friends serves to hasten the rejection of the historical stereotypes. The Paris-based writers and artists considered themselves closer in spirit to Virginia Woolf than they did to Gertrude Stein or Radclyffe Hall, with whom they occasionally parted. Although Barney and Stein were

32. Lady Una Troubridge, The Life of Radclyffe Hall (New York: Arno Press, 1975 [1966]). I am grateful to Esther Newton, who shared with me her new research on Radclyffe Hall.


34. Audre Lorde, “The Erotic as Power” (paper delivered at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Mount Holyoke College, August 1978; to be published as a pamphlet by Out and Out Books in 1979).
friendly neighbors, Barney never approved of Stein's male-derived attitudes toward women, and she particularly deplored the nature of the Stein-Toklas relationship. In 1938 Natalie Barney wrote to Romaine Brooks: "Alice T. is withering away under the stress of moving into a new flat... I am afraid 'the bigger one,' who gets fatter and fatter and fatter, will sooner or later devour her."  

Represented as Valérie Seymour in The Well, Natalie Barney's differences with the author are vividly detailed. Stephen Gordon suffers life bewailing the curse that stamped her abnormal. Valérie Seymour loves life and courts it passionately with imagination and daring. Because both women and men admire and love Valérie Seymour, Stephen Gordon concludes that she is "a creature apart." Surely it is Hall's inability to recognize Barney's essential connectedness with and empathy for the women and men who were her friends that shaped their experiences so differently.

The editors of the Arno series reprinted many of the works written by Natalie Barney and the poet Renée Vivien. Still untranslated, they remain the best available reference to their world and their ideas. Barney's Traits et portraits, first published when she was eighty-six, is prefaced by an informative portrait by Magdeleine Wauthier as well as a self-portrait by Barney. The volume includes essays about several of her friends—Elizabeth De Gramont, Gabriel d'Annunzio, and André Gide, and concludes with a series of essays highlighted by "L'Amour défendu," a celebration of lesbianism. Another volume of portraits, Adventures de l'esprit (1929), includes essays about Djuna Barnes, Colette, Romaine Brooks, Gertrude Stein, Renée Vivien, Lucie Delarue-Madrus, Anna Wickham—the important British feminist poet whom Barney called "the English Verlaine"—and Marie Lénèru, whose pacifist analyses during World War I inspired Barney's antiwar activities. This book reveals the wide range of Barney's artistic and political enthusiasms and the depths of her pacifism and feminism. Although Barney was an elitist, a classist who eventually became utterly reactionary, she was very serious about politics. The authors who have to date published books on the lesbians of Paris emphasize their sex lives to the exclusion of all else.

Since Natalie Barney apparently never threw anything away, and George Wickes, her biographer, tells us she left over 40,000 letters at the time of her death in 1972, there will undoubtedly be many other studies of this complicated woman—the center of a circle that included Romaine Brooks, Dorothy Wilde, Colette, and Remy de Gourmont, whose Lettres à l'amazone, inspired by her daily rides astride through the Bois de

Boulogne, and his great admiration for her, established Barney prominently in Paris literary society. Gayle Rubin, who has written a splendid introduction to the Naiad Press's edition of Renée Vivien's autobiographical novel A Woman Appeared to Me (translated by Jeannette Foster), is one of several feminists who have already done research in the Barney archive. But at present there are two uneven surveys of her life—one by her friend Jean Chalon, Portrait d'une seductrice, and George Wickes's Amazon of Letters: The Life and Loves of Natalie Barney. Full of anecdotal and sometimes fascinating information, it is perhaps the best of its genre. But its genre is neither feminist nor deep. We learn that for sixty years Barney's salon was a leading international center of art, theater, and literature. From 1900 to 1963 Barney wrote in many modes—verse, drama, essays, epigrams. But Wickes does not take Barney's writing seriously and he tells us, offering no evidence whatsoever, that Barney did not take herself seriously either. He tells us that Barney was a legend in her own time, the most notorious seductress of the most desirable women in Paris. He tells us the women "gossiped." He tells us of the tribulations of their frequent flirtations and longer affairs. He tells us that Barney was "cynical" about love, and he separates love from the life-long friendships she worked so vigorously to sustain.

Although neither as heartily researched nor as beautifully packaged as Meryle Secrest's biography of Romaine Brooks, Between Me and Life (with stunning color plates and excellent photographs), Wickes at least spares the reader the agony of Secrest's half-tutored psychobiography. Secrest's book was inspired by the Smithsonian Institution's National Collection of Fine Arts exhibition in 1971 of Romaine Brooks's work. Because Robert de Montesquiou said that Brooks's penetrating portraits rendered her "a thief of souls," the catalog exhibition was beautifully issued as Romaine Brooks: Thief of Souls, edited by Adelyn D. Breeskin.

An artist of power, wealthy, independent, Romaine Brooks died in Nice at the age of ninety-six. For fifty years Natalie Barney was the primary relationship in her life—until at the age of eighty-five Barney took one lover too many and Romaine Brooks refused to see her again. Although Secrest's book is full of information, her half-penny heterosexist psychoanalysis renders her work only marginally serviceable.

It is not my intent to be unfair to these works about these independent and creative women who, acting on behalf of their own needs, their own visions, and their own work—not acting out the prescribed roles of wife or servant—have until so recently been forced out of history, ripped from our collective memory. And I am grateful for the

information that these volumes provide. The authors, like all of us, are products of our culture, our time. And I believe that it can be dangerous and misleading to speculate about other people's motives. I do not know, for example, why George Wickes wrote about Barney. But it seems to me that there is an element of male voyeurism in the treatment of the lives of lesbians that has nothing to do with the feminist search through the past. We are searching the past because there are to be found there a great variety of models to alter, enhance, intensify our own visions, our own options, as we move from the male dominance of patriarchy to more equalitarian relations and the full range of choices available to women and to women and men in a fully creative and unconfined society.

Now having the resources and the evidence to name and analyze our world, feminists may begin to change its very contours. As Jane Marcus wrote in "Thinking Back through Our Mothers," her essay on Virginia Woolf, "In redeeming our own past we become our own redeemers." Several women in New York City have already created a center of such redemptive literature. Dedicated to ending that "time of willful deprivation" mandated by years of silence and denial, the Lesbian Herstory Archives serves as both a library of published works and a clearinghouse for letters, photographs, diaries, and unpublished manuscripts.

Lengthy bibliographies of novels, poetry, essays, and histories are now available to supplement that recently reprinted but long obscured (and originally self-published in 1956) essential source, Jeannette Foster's Sex Variant Women in Literature. Foster's classic work remains the most thorough analysis of women-loving literature from Sappho to Anais Nin. We have, in addition, Louise Bernikow's informative and well-edited The World Split Open: Four Centuries of Women Poets in England and America, 1532–1950; Jonathan Katz's feminist Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the USA, a pioneering collection of documents of essential value to all feminists researching the past; and Dolores Klaich's Woman + Woman: Attitudes toward Lesbianism, one of the best of the many recent surveys that integrates contemporary personal interviews with historical chapters and a devastating critique of the name calling of the psychiatric profession.

Recent contributions to historical, political, and sexual theory have emphasized our right to discard crippling traditions and stereotypes and

39. The Lesbian Herstory Archives, P.O. Box 1258, New York, N.Y. 10001.
40. Jeannette Foster, Sex Variant Women in Literature (Baltimore: Diana Press, 1975 [1956]).
their psychoanalytic props. Notable among the many recent books that reflect the full dimensions of the current political movement is Ginny Vida's collection of contemporary writings, *Our Right to Love: A Lesbian Resource Book*.44 One of the major areas of political activity is to establish an environment in which women will not be denied access to or custody of their own children for reasons of sexual preference. Several of Bernice Goodman's essays collected in *The Lesbian: A Celebration of Difference* deal with the issue of lesbian mothers, as does *By Her Own Admission*, the case of Mary Jo Risher's fight to keep her son.45

Sexual theory is advanced deeply by the work of such anthropologists as Gayle Rubin, whose article “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex”46 is excellent and generative, as are many of the essays to be found in feminist journals such as *Conditions*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *13th Moon*, *Chrysalis*, *Signs*, and *Quest*. The first two issues of *Conditions*, for example, featured a provocative interview with Adrienne Rich, whose recently published volume of poetry, *The Dream of a Common Language*, is profoundly woman-loving in both the political and personal sense. In August 1975 Beth Hodges edited an issue of *Margins* and in 1976 an issue of *Sinister Wisdom* devoted to lesbian feminist writing and publishing and including works by such poets as Jan Clausen, Susan Sherman, Susan Griffin, and Joan Larkin, who publishes Out and Out Books. Two essays that expand our understanding of the relationship between race, sex, and class are Barbara Smith's valuable introduction to black feminist criticism and black lesbian literature and Audre Lorde's “Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving,” which deals with the use of lesbian-baiting “to obscure the true double face of racism and sexism.” Catharine R. Stimpson's provocative and important analysis of “The Androgyne and the Homosexual” appeared in 1974, and her essay “The Mind, the Body, and Gertrude Stein” in 1977. The fifth issue of *Sinister Wisdom* featured Michelle Cliff's eloquent “Notes on Speechlessness” and Judith Schwarz's helpful introductory essay, “Researching Lesbian History.”47


Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's pioneering essay, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth Century America," effectively changes our conceptual framework and definitional structure of women's relations. My own work, "Female Support Networks and Political Activism," called for a more considered definition of the word lesbian. In my work on such political activists as social reformers Jane Addams and Lillian Wald it has become clear to me that the legal and social manifestatons of bigotry and repression are reinforced and validated by the historical denial of lesbianism. It is the very conventionality, the nonstereotypic quality of women like Addams and Wald that is significant. Not until our society accepts as moral and ordinary the full range of personal choice will repression and bigotry disappear.  

Yet still today lesbianism is stereotyped, rigidified, and denied. The most recent example of historical denial is Anna Mary Wells's Miss Marks and Miss Woolley. Two "admired and respected" women, Jeannette Marks, chair of the literature department, and Mary Woolley, president of Mt. Holyoke, were loving companions who lived together for almost fifty years. Denying the lesbianism of the distinguished women of the past, "the admired and respected" achievers, enables heterosexualists to perpetuate the myth of lesbianism as sickness and criminality. And so Wells insists that Marks and Woolley never touched each other. Although all the internal evidence of the letters quoted in the book contradicts that assertion, Wells refuses to call them "Sapphists." She tells us that decision is partly based on her doubt that Sappho herself was a lesbian, and mainly based on her belief that to use such a word would be "pejorative." Besides, Wells insists, "my own opinion" is that Marks and Woolley "voluntarily renounced all physical contact." Even if they did renounce all physical contact we can still argue that they were lesbians: they chose and loved each other. Women who love women, who choose women to nurture and support and to create a living environment in which to work creatively and independently, are lesbians.


This entire issue would seem absurd indeed were we discussing adult men and women in similar circumstances. We know, for example, that General Eisenhower and his friend Kay Summersby were passionately involved with each other. One of the principals told us so. They loved each other. They looked ardently into each others’ eyes. They held hands. They cantered swiftly across England’s countryside. They played golf and bridge and laughed. They were inseparable. But they never “consummated” their love in the acceptable (or unacceptable) sexual manner. Now does that fact render Kay Summersby and General Eisenhower somehow less in love? Were they not heterosexual?

What are we talking about then? Bigotry and foolishness. But a dangerous bigotry and a cruel foolishness—still capable of wrecking joy, depriving people of job security, severing mother from child. And so, as Adrienne Rich has written, we must insist on the word lesbian. “The word ‘Lesbian’ must be affirmed because to discard it is to collaborate with silence and lying about our very existence, the closet-game, the creation of the UNSPEAKABLE.”

But lesbianism is not, in the final analysis, the real issue. What our dominant society so fundamentally opposes is women’s independent access to our erotic power. As Audre Lorde has so persuasively argued, heterosexual or lesbian, once women experience that power we will connect with the basic source of our strength, and it will be clear that we derive it from ourselves, not from men, not from any outside place. For Audre Lorde the word erotic personifies “love in all its aspects—born of chaos and personifying creative power and harmony.” It is “an assertion of the life-force of women...” Of course, independent, life-affirming, women-loving women “so empowered are dangerous.” Nurtured and empowered by the erotic, such women may even look forward, as Virginia Woolf did during the last year of her life, to a future both feminist and classless.

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51. From Audre Lorde, “The Erotic as Power” (n. 54 above).