

## Radclyffe Hall's Literary Works At the Interface between the Discourses of Medicine and Law

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study is to untangle the web of implications that the various strands of discourse – pertaining to fields as diverse as literature, journalism, sociology, medicine and law – have had on the conception, creation and reception of Radclyffe Hall's literary works, with a focus on her infamous novel, *The Well of Loneliness*. Due to the mingling of such discourses this novel took precisely the particular form it did, its publishers first plummeted into agony and then soared to ecstasy, while its author rose from local fame to worldwide notoriety, at the expense of accurate representations of the alternative lifestyle currently known as lesbianism.

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*"The world is not humane because it is made by human beings and it does not become humane just because the human voice sounds in it, but only when it has become the object of discourse. However much we are affected by the things of the world, however deeply they may stir and stimulate us, they become human for us only when we can discuss them with our fellows [...] We humanise what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking of it we learn to be human." Margot Stern Strom<sup>1</sup>*

*Marguerite* Radclyffe Hall was born on August 12, 1880 in Bournemouth, Hampshire, England, to a wealthy family that was soon to fall apart. Mary Jane Diehl, her mother, was an American widow from Philadelphia. Her father, Radclyffe Radclyffe-Hall, who suffered from asthma, was the son of an eminent physician. Her parents got a divorce in 1882, so she spent a lonely childhood, at first with her pugnacious mother and her kind, but weak maternal grandmother, and then with her mother and stepfather, an Italian professor of music. Radclyffe Hall resented her given name, Marguerite, which she replaced first with "Peter" and later with "John," probably

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<sup>1</sup> Margot Stern Strom, introduction to *Facing History and Ourselves. Holocaust and Human Behaviour* (Brookline, Massachusetts: Facing History and Ourselves Foundation Inc., 1994), xxii.

after her great-grandfather, whom she resembled both in her good-looks and in her enduring love for dogs and horses. She enjoyed periodical visits from her father, up to the age of 18, when he, unfortunately, succumbed to a grievous pulmonary disease. As soon as she turned 21, Hall left her belligerent mother and her uncaring stepfather, to live in Kensington with her grandmother, the only person who had, until then, ever offered her genuine affection.<sup>1</sup>

Hall only occasionally attended various day-schools, spent just one year at King's College, in London, and some time at a school in Germany. Despite these rather sporadic educational endeavours, Hall had been writing poems since early childhood and published five volumes of poetry: *Twixt Earth and Stars* (1906), *A Sheaf of Verses: Poems* (1908), *Poems of the Past and Present* (1910), *Songs of Three Countries and Other Poems* (1913) and *The Forgotten Island* (1915). One of her best-known poems, taken from the 1913 volume and entitled *The Blind Ploughman*, was set to music by Robert Coningsby Clarke and Coleridge Taylor, and performed by a number of famous singers at a charity event dedicated to those who had lost their eyesight due to being wounded in World War One.<sup>2</sup> Whereas most of Hall's early poetic work is heavily indebted to Edwardian nature verses, the last volume features erotic poems of exalted passion, which offer no clear specification of the beloved's gender, allowing an informed reader, however, to read between the lines somewhat veiled references to Radclyffe Hall's 1913–1914 brief love-affair with Phoebe Hoare<sup>3</sup>.

Given her educational shortcomings, her lack of literary experience and her undisciplined working style, it took Hall quite a long time to write her prose, but by the year 1924 her first two novels, a social comedy entitled *The Forge* and *The Unlit Lamp*, a bildungsroman, had already been published. *The Forge*, Hall's second novel, but the first to be published, gives shape to a fictionalized portrait of the American artist Romaine Brooks, who had been Natalie Barney's lover of fifty years. *The Unlit Lamp* was Hall's first completed novel and, according to most critics, her most meritorious one, although it was her 1926 novel, *Adam's Breed*, that received both the Prix Femina and the 1927 James Tait Black Memorial Prize, being the only novel, apart from E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, to be awarded both these coveted prizes. Just like *Adam's Breed*, her other novels, *A Saturday Life* (1925), *The Master of the House* (1932), and *The Sixth Beatitude* (1936), were also "infused with charity and pity," and were religious in spirit, telling of Hall's growing academic interest in psychical research and of her permanent concern with finding the path towards spiritual wholeness.<sup>4</sup>

The story of Joan Ogden, a woman who sacrifices her love for another woman, called Elizabeth Rodney, in order to stay with her mother, whom she considers to be her responsibility, a story entitled *The Unlit Lamp*, was Hall's first novel to extensively, though not explicitly, treat lesbian love. It seems that Robert Browning's poem, *The*

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see Vera Brittain, *Radclyffe Hall. A Case of Obscenity?* (London: Femina Books Ltd., 1968), 30–32.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>3</sup> Joanne Glasgow, "Radclyffe Hall," in *glbtq: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture* (2002), [http://www.glbtq.com/literature/hall\\_radclyffe.html](http://www.glbtq.com/literature/hall_radclyffe.html) (accessed May 30, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Brittain, *Radclyffe Hall*, 72.

*Statue and the Bust*, presenting the love story between “two similarly frustrated heterosexual lovers,” had inspired Hall in choosing the title of this novel.<sup>1</sup> “And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost/ Is the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin.” The love between Joan and Elizabeth is not accounted for in Freudian terms (although some hints do exist), but appears to be rather a matter of choice, resembling the political one characteristic of radical lesbians. It is a result, or a natural follow-up of the feminist attitudes adopted by Joan, after facing the patriarchal mentality of her father who, instead of encouraging her to become a doctor, as she so much desires, tells her that medicine is “[a]n unsex[ing], indecent profession for any woman, and any woman who takes it up is indecent and unsexed. [...] I’ll have none of these new-fanged women’s rights in my house; you will marry; do you hear me? That’s a woman’s profession!”<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth, her intellectually powerful tutor, helps Joan shape her feminist convictions, and this similar view of the unfair world they live in brings the two women together: “But [...] a woman’s brain is as good as a man’s. I cannot see why women should be debarred from a degree, or why they should get lower salaries when they work for the same hours, and I don’t see why they should be expected to do nothing more intellectual than darn socks and have babies.”<sup>3</sup>

As Lillian Faderman points out, “[t]he primary cause for Joan’s unhappiness is shown to be not that she was born in the wrong body, but that she was born in the wrong time, and that without a support group she lacked the courage of her feminist convictions.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the end of the novel shows a defeated middle-aged woman who acknowledges both her failure and the changes that are on their way, through the young generation of women dedicated to the fight for women’s rights: “But she, Joan Ogden, was the forerunner who had failed, the pioneer who feared his own prophecies. These others had gone forward, [...] and if the world was not quite ready for them yet, if they had to meet criticism and ridicule and opposition, if they were not all as happy as they might be, still, they were at least brave, whereas she had been a coward, conquered by circumstances.”<sup>5</sup> In this novel, Hall proves to be one of the foremothers of contemporary lesbian feminism, by showing that “women often determine not to marry, that their affections go to other women – not because they are men trapped in women’s bodies but because they reject prescribed roles,” and thus begin their search for a loving, balanced, fulfilling relationship in which their life-long partner is likely to say, as Elizabeth says to Joan, ‘I not only want your devotion [...] I want your work, your independence, your success’.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (New York: The Women’s Press Ltd., 1985 [1981]), 318.

<sup>2</sup> Radclyffe Hall, *The Unlit Lamp*, (London: Cassels, 1924), Book 2, Chapter 18, Project Gutenberg Australia (2007), <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks07/0701131h.html> (accessed May 20, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Hall, *The Unlit Lamp*, Book 4, Chapter 32.

<sup>4</sup> Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 319.

<sup>5</sup> Hall, *The Unlit Lamp*, Book 5, Chapter 44.

<sup>6</sup> Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 319.



Șerban Savu, *They Cannot Hear Us*, 2008, 30 x 42 cm, oil on canvas

Unfortunately, not this was to be the book to make Hall famous, but the one written in 1928, under the influence of Krafft-Ebing's thesis on 'congenital inversion.' The novel *The Well of Loneliness*, as well as her story *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself* (published only in 1934, despite having been written as early as 1926), abandon the feminist perspective and follow the path of heterosexual social constructs and stereotypes, in an attempt to obtain a more peaceful life for gay people, by showing that homosexuality is not a matter of choice but a congenital 'defect.' Therefore, homosexual men and women should be treated as sick people who, although abnormal, have their place and their role in society. They are not 'unrepentant' sinners but, as Stephen, the novel's heroine states, 'hapled crippled' that should be tolerated by the more fortunate ones: "And there are so many of us – thousands of miserable, unwanted people [...] hideously maimed and ugly – God's cruel; he let us get flawed in the making."<sup>1</sup>

The short story *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself* marks the first literary outcome of Hall's interest in and experimentation with the notion of congenital sexual inversion, a term employed by sexologists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to make reference to homosexuality. Hall was primarily influenced by two books from which Una Troubridge, her friend and lover used to read to her: Havelock Ellis's book, *Sexual Inversion*, which expands on ideas outlined in the main work of Krafft-Ebing, the German sexologist and psychiatrist, entitled *Psychopathia Sexualis: eine Klinisch-*

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<sup>1</sup> Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (London: Virago Press Limited, 1992 [1928]), 207.

*Forensische Studie*, and published in 1886 as “a forensic reference book for physicians and judges.”<sup>1</sup>

Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902) distinguishes between *acquired* and *congenital* homosexuality, considering this distinction of great “theoretical and therapeutical value,”<sup>2</sup> and begins the chapter entitled *Homo-sexual Feeling as an Acquired Manifestation in Both Sexes* by insisting that “*The determining factor here is the demonstration of perverse feeling for the same sex, not the proof of sexual acts with the same sex.* These two phenomena must not be confounded with each other, *perversity* must not be taken for *perversion*.”<sup>3</sup>

*Acquired homosexuality* in the case of women is the result of masturbation, fear of pregnancy or “abhorrence of men, by reason of physical or moral defects” and, apparently, curable. Thus, Krafft-Ebing presents a case study of a 28 year-old woman diagnosed with congenital inversion who declared: “I am judged incorrectly, if it is thought that I feel myself a man toward the female sex. In my whole thought and feeling I am much more a woman. Did I not love my cousin as only a woman can love a man? [...] in Pesth, dressed as a man, I had an opportunity to observe my cousin. I saw that I was wholly deceived in him. That gave me terrible heart-pangs. I know that I could never love another man. [...] As a result of the insight into men’s motives, [...] I took an unconquerable dislike to them. However, since I am of a very passionate nature and need to have some loving person on whom to depend, and to whom I can wholly surrender myself, I felt myself more and more powerfully drawn toward intelligent women and girls who were in sympathy with me.”<sup>4</sup> The woman spent two years in an asylum and was released (apparently) cured of the so-called sexual inversion.<sup>5</sup>

In the chapter entitled *Homo-sexual Feeling as an Abnormal Congenital Manifestation*, Krafft-Ebing postulates the existence of *congenital homosexuality* and explains his rejection of other specialists’ theses that congenital inversion does not exist, by arguing that it cannot possibly be acquired, since it often manifests itself so early in an individual’s life, “at a period in which external influences may be considered to be absolutely excluded.”<sup>6</sup> A characteristic of people afflicted by inversion is the complete lack of interest in and attraction to individuals of the opposite sex, “even to the extent of horror,” and the presence of sexual and emotional attraction towards people of the same sex.<sup>7</sup> Krafft-Ebing distinguishes four different manifestations of this “abnormality,” function of the degree to which the inversion has developed in various individuals: 1. *Psychical and psycho-sexual hermaphroditism* (inclination towards the same sex exists, but there are traces of hetero-sexual instincts); 2. *Homo-sexuality* (the inclination

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<sup>1</sup> “Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing,” Wikipedia – the Free Encyclopaedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard\\_von\\_Krafft-Ebing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_von_Krafft-Ebing) (accessed 21 May, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, trans. Francis Joseph Rebman (New York: Rebman, 1900), 448. Open Library Internet Archive, <http://www.archive.org/details/psychopathiasexu00kraffuoft> (accessed 28 May, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 289.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 294–296.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 448.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

towards the same sex is exclusive); 3. *Effemination* (in males) and *Viraginity* (in females) – “the entire mental existence is altered to correspond with the abnormal sexual instinct;” 4. *Androgyny* (in males) and *Gynandry* (in females) – both the mental existence and the physical appearance (voice, features, body shape) correspond with the abnormal sexual instinct.<sup>1</sup>

Remarkable is Krafft-Ebing’s insistence, in the chapter entitled *Lesbian Love*, that “[w]here the sexual intercourse is between adults, its legal importance is very slight.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, he put forward the moral argument that same-sex attraction was unnatural because it did not lead to procreation, and coined the word *heterosexual*, which he used to refer to a type of perversion similar, though not identical to the *homosexual* one: “Krafft-Ebing applied the term heterosexual to refer to instances of men and women engaging in sex when, due to contraception, age, or other conditions, there was little or no chance of reproduction and therefore contrary to nature.”<sup>3</sup> On the whole, his carefully detailed work was surprisingly open-minded for his time, and admirably non-judgemental, although not all his theories were accurate. Krafft-Ebing attempted to cure homosexuality through hypnosis and argued, for instance, as Julia Hanson points out, that “an individual’s sexual orientation was closely connected to gender, speculating that heterosexual women look and behave in a feminine manner while homosexual women are notably masculine in behaviour and interests,”<sup>4</sup> but recent research conducted, among others, by Anne Peplau<sup>5</sup> and Harry Oosterhuis<sup>6</sup> has disproven these theories. However, he contributed to the validation of Sexology as a new field of inquiry, and, in an article published in the year 1901 in the *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen*,<sup>7</sup> he replaced the term “biological anomaly” which he previously used to describe homosexuality, with the term “biological differentiation.” This led Hanson to conclude that Krafft-Ebing was one of the first researchers “to view homosexuals as normal people with a different sexual orientation.”<sup>8</sup> This was one of the earliest works on sexual practices to discuss issues pertaining to the sexual pleasure of the woman and to homosexuality; it also became “the medico-legal textual authority on psychosexual diversity, and a most influential human sexuality book.”<sup>9</sup> Krafft-Ebing

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 336–337.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 607.

<sup>3</sup> Alex Hunnicut, “Richard von Krafft-Ebing,” in *glbtq: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture* (2004), [http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/krafft\\_ebing\\_r,2.html](http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/krafft_ebing_r,2.html) (accessed May 30, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Julie Hanson, “Richard von Krafft-Ebing”, 2004, <http://www.mcm.edu/~dodd1/TWU/FS5023/Krafft-Ebing.htm> (accessed May 12, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Anne Peplau, “A New Paradigm for Understanding Women’s Sexuality and Sexual Orientation,” *Journal of Social Issues* 56/2 (2000): 329–350.

<sup>6</sup> Harry Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry and the Making of Sexual Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, “Neue Studien auf dem Gebiete der Homosexualität,” in *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* (Yearbook of Sexual Intermediate Stages), ed. Magnus Hirschfeld (Leipzig: Verlag von Max Spohr, 1901), 1–36.

<sup>8</sup> Julie Hanson, “Richard von Krafft-Ebing,” 2004, <http://www.mcm.edu/~dodd1/TWU/FS5023/Krafft-Ebing.htm> (accessed May 12, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> “Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing,” Wikipedia – the Free Encyclopaedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard\\_von\\_Krafft-Ebing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_von_Krafft-Ebing) (accessed 21 May, 2011).

viewed homosexuality as a biological differentiation, having its origins in the embryonic and foetal stages of gestation, that developed into a “sexual inversion” of the brain. His ideas were only popular until the publication of Sigmund Freud’s theories, which appealed more to the medical practitioners who favoured a psychological account of homosexuality.

The British psychologist and physician Henry Havelock Ellis (1859–1939) was a social reformer and a supporter of sexual liberation who dedicated most of his work to the study of human sexuality. Several of his writings covered *novel issues* such as *female sexual pleasure* – he was one of the first English specialists to insist that women are sexual beings who should derive pleasure from sexual encounters<sup>1</sup> – and *homosexuality*,<sup>2</sup> which he regarded not as a pathological condition, but as an innate characteristic, arguing for the tolerance and acceptance rather than the punishment or rejection of homosexual individuals.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the strictness of Victorian morals, among other works, Ellis dared to publish, over a period of 31 years (1897–1928), a seven-volume study entitled: *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, whose first part dealt with sexual inversion. This first volume had initially been published in 1896 under the title *Das konträre Geschlechtsgefühl*, in Germany, and was later translated into English. The English translation of this book, *Sexual Inversion*, co-authored with John Addington Symonds, appeared in England in 1897, and on 31 May 1898 the bookseller, George Bedborough, was arrested and prosecuted for stocking and selling it. In spite of the fact that a committee was formed to defend the book, all its copies were withdrawn from sale after it was declared obscene by a British judge, who warned Ellis thus: “So long as you do not touch this filthy work again with your hands and so long as you lead a respectable life, you will hear no more of this. But if you choose to go back to your evil ways, you will be brought up before me, and it will be my duty to send you to prison for a very long time.”<sup>4</sup> George Bernard Shaw declared that the prosecution of Mr. Bedborough for selling Mr. Havelock Ellis’s book is “a masterpiece of police stupidity and magisterial ignorance [...]” The renowned Irish playwright also added that in France and in Germany “the free circulation of such works as the one of Mr. Havelock Ellis’s now in question has done a good deal to make the public in those countries understand that decency and sympathy are as necessary in

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<sup>1</sup> See also Angus McLaren, *Twentieth Century Sexuality: A History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Ellis, on hearing that he was rumoured to have been the one who coined the term *homosexual*, explained, in his 1897 work entitled *Studies in Psychology*, that *homosexual* is “a barbarously hybrid word,” for which he “claim[s] no responsibility.” A Greek and Latin hybrid indeed, the word comes from the Greek *homos* = same, and not from the Latin *homo* = man. Actually coined by a Karoly Maria Kertbeny, a man of letters who published his works in German under the pen name K. M. Benkert, the term was first used in a letter of 1868 and appeared in print for the first time the following year alongside the term *normalsexual* in two anonymous pamphlets directed against the criminalization of same sex relationships in the newly formed federation of the northern German states. Krafft-Ebing used it extensively in his *Psychopathia Sexualis*, and it first appeared in English in C. G. Chaddock’s translation of this book in 1892.

<sup>3</sup> Andrea Faria, “Havelock Ellis” (2004),

<http://www.mcm.edu/~dodd1/TWU/FS5023/Ellis.htm> (accessed May 12, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/TUhavelock.htm> (accessed March 9, 2011).

dealing with sexual as with any other subjects. In England we still repudiate decency and sympathy and make virtues of blackguards and ferocity.”<sup>1</sup>

Under the influence of Havelock Ellis’s writings, Radclyffe Hall, who had “spent much of her twenties pursuing women she eventually lost to marriage,”<sup>2</sup> adopted for herself the label *congenital invert*, and attempted to offer the reading public a fictional rendering of the difficult lives that people born this way are forced to live. The main character of the short story *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself*, Wilhelmina, brings her contribution to the First World War by heading one of the Red Cross Allied Ambulance Units on the French front. A born leader, endowed with so-called masculine qualities, such as management and financial skills, mediation and risk assessment abilities, she realises, once the war is over, that, despite her glorious war experiences, the world no longer needs her outstanding talents and her profound devotion. Forced to return to her sisters, Sarah and Fanny Ogilvy, with whom she shares a monotonous existence in Surrey, England, Wilhelmina embarks on a mystical atavistic journey of self-discovery that ends with the revelation of her primitive self as male, rather than female, which is far from surprising, since she obviously feels as if she were a man trapped in a female body, and the following morning Miss Ogilvy is found dead.<sup>3</sup> According to Joanne Glasgow, this story “is by no means simply a bleak portrait, nor a bleak assessment of lesbian possibility. It is not a portrait of a failed woman, nor of a failed invert, but rather of a failed culture, one that can accommodate its inverts only in times of national crisis without ever acknowledging their deepest, most primitive, and most natural sources.”<sup>4</sup>

Lillian Faderman also points out that “some feminist awareness [...] regarding women’s social and professional limitations” are still transparent to the readers of this story, but, regretfully, Hall’s most famous novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, “drops all hint of feminist awareness,” and renders ‘normal women’ as “silly, evil or weak,” possibly because she feared that a feminist stance “would only detract from her congenital-inversion argument.”<sup>5</sup> Writing this novel within the structural limits set by the medical and the legal discourses prevailing in those times, Hall was confronted with the difficulty of arguing in favour of “the love that dares not speak its name.” This phrase was coined by Oscar Wilde’s lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, who in a poem entitled *Two Loves*, published in 1896 in the *Chameleon*, stated: “I am the Love that dare not speak its name,” probably motivated by the fact that male homosexuality was a criminal offense in 19<sup>th</sup> century England. When, in April 1895, Oscar Wilde was asked by Charles Gill, the prosecutor in the case brought against him on account of sodomy and indecency, “[w]hat is the love that dare not speak its name?” Wilde’s reply was: “The ‘Love that dare not speak its name’ in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> “Radclyffe Hall,” Wikipedia – the Free Encyclopaedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radclyffe\\_Hall#cite\\_note-glbtq-1](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radclyffe_Hall#cite_note-glbtq-1) (accessed February 5, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Radclyffe Hall, *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself* (London: Heinemann, 1934).

<sup>4</sup> Joanne Glasgow, “Radclyffe Hall,” in *glbtq: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture* (2002), [http://www.glbtq.com/literature/hall\\_radclyffe.html](http://www.glbtq.com/literature/hall_radclyffe.html) (accessed May 30, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 320.



very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the ‘Love that dare not speak its name’, and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, and it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it should be so, the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it.”<sup>1</sup> Female homosexuality was not a criminal offense only because in 1920 Queen Victoria, who is reported to have said: “Women do not do such things,” refused to sign the Labouchère Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, until the references to this kind of sexual behaviour were removed. Other historians argue that their Lordships did not insist on banning lesbianism for fear of raising women’s consciousness regarding the existence of such practices.

*The Well of Loneliness* is the story of Stephen Gordon, born into a privileged family residing at Morton Hall, a girl whose parents, Lady Anna and Sir Philip, would have wanted a son, hence the male name she was given. Stephen’s upbringing is almost entirely dominated by her father, who encourages her to practice predominantly masculine activities, such as riding and hunting. Her education is placed in the hands of two governesses, Mademoiselle Duphot and Miss Puddleton, and Stephen keeps in touch with the two throughout her life. Developing very strong feelings for Collins, one of the servants, Stephen cannot hide her devastating anger at finding the object of her affection together with Henry, the new footman: “Henry caught Collins roughly by the wrists, and dragged her towards him, still handling her roughly, and he kissed her full on the lips. Stephen’s head suddenly felt hot and dizzy, she was filled with a blind, uncomprehending rage; she wanted to cry out, but her voice failed completely, so that all she could do was to splutter. But the very next moment she had seized a broken flower-pot and had hurled it hard and straight at the footman. It struck him in the face, cutting open his cheek, down which the blood trickled slowly. He stood as though stunned, gently mopping the cut, while Collins stared dumbly at Stephen.”<sup>2</sup> Stephen’s reaction brings her father to the realization that his daughter is different from other girls, lacking in femininity not only in what regards her physical appearance and activities of choice, but also in her personality traits, psychological characteristics, emotional attachments and long-term horizons of expectation.

Stephen bonds with Martin Hallam, but their friendship is shattered when he proposes to her: “She was staring at him in a kind of dumb horror, staring at his eyes that were clouded by desire, while gradually over her colourless face there was spreading an expression of the deepest repulsion – terror and repulsion he saw on her face, and something else too, a look as of outrage. He could not believe this thing that he saw, this insult to all that he felt to be sacred; for a moment he in his turn, must stare, then he

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<sup>1</sup> “The love that dare not speak its name,” <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/the-love-that-dare-not-speak-its-name.html> (accessed December 4, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, 24.

came a step nearer, still unable to believe. [...] He felt stunned, incapable of understanding. All that he knew was that he must get away, away from Stephen, away from Morton, away from the thoughts that would follow after.”<sup>1</sup> When an accident leads to the death of her father, the world is bound to change for Stephen, who no longer enjoys the devout protection, the unconditional love and the profound understanding that Sir Philip had offered her till then. Seeking comfort, Stephen indulges in an affair with Angela Crossby, a neighbour’s wife, and the scandal that ensues causes Lady Anna to banish her daughter from Morton Hall.

After spending some time in Paris, Stephen joins an Allied ambulance unit and, once the war is over, returns to Paris together with Mary Llewellyn, her new lover, who is, however, never acknowledged by Lady Anna, this being a permanent source of tension. Their social life suffers, as their friends desert them the minute they learn about their relationship, and Stephen tends to neglect Mary, focusing on her writing. In an attempt to resolve conflict they eventually join the Parisian lesbian scene, “the garish and tragic night life of Paris that lies open to such people.”<sup>2</sup>

Soon Martin Hallam re-enters Stephen’s life, and she introduces him to Mary, only to realise, sometime later, that Martin’s feelings of friendship for her lover have turned into passionate love: “Stephen, if I stay I’m going to fight you. Do you understand? We’ll fight this thing out until one of us has to admit that he’s beaten. I’ll do all in my power to take Mary from you – all that’s honourable, that is – for I mean to play straight, because whatever you may think I’m your friend, only, you see – I love Mary Llewellyn.”<sup>3</sup>

Stephen believes that she must sacrifice herself at the altar of her love for Mary, since Martin could offer her beloved a much better, more sheltered life. Given Mary’s love, devotion, faithfulness, frankness and loyalty, the only solution Stephen finds is to lead her sweetheart to believe that she has cheated on her with a dear friend, Valérie Seymour, thus pushing Mary into Martin’s arms: “And now she must pay very dearly indeed for that inherent respect of the normal which nothing had ever been able to destroy, not even the long years of persecution – [...] children, a home that the world would respect, ties of affection that the world would hold sacred, the blessed security and the peace of being released from the world’s persecution. And suddenly Martin appeared to Stephen as a creature endowed with incalculable bounty, having in his hands all those priceless gifts which she, love’s mendicant could never offer. Only one gift could she offer to love, to Mary, and that was the gift of Martin.”<sup>4</sup>

Heather Love pertinently argues that “Stephen’s embrace of the medical discourse of inversion offers a textbook example of Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘reverse discourse’, which he describes as the process by which a marginalized group begins to speak on its own behalf in the same terms by which it has been rendered marginal.”<sup>5</sup> In *The Well of Loneliness* Hall endowed Stephen with the characteristics

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 96–97.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 384.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 434.

<sup>4</sup> Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, 438–439.

<sup>5</sup> Heather Love, “Hard Times and Heartaches: Radclyffe Hall’s *Well of Loneliness*” (1997), <http://www.ags.uci.edu/> (accessed December 12, 1997).

given by Havelock Ellis to what was called ‘the female invert,’ going as far as to ask the famous sexologist to write an introduction to her book. It was precisely this move that permitted Hall “to represent Stephen as the first fully sexual and self-identifying lesbian character in literature.”<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of Hall’s efforts to make her book accepted and homosexuality acceptable in society’s eyes, she succeeded in neither, and *The Well of Loneliness* became the subject of the most famous trial for obscenity in the history of British law.

In 1928 when the book appeared, it enjoyed considerably favourable reviews and quite successful sales, but James Douglas’s deleterious article of August 19, published in the *Sunday Express*, which, at first, caused the sales to skyrocket, turning the book’s title into sensational headlines, set in motion an unfortunate chain of events that led to the impossibility of defence and to the destruction of the book. At the time, the accused in a case like the one brought against Jonathan Cape, the publisher, and Leopold B. Hill, the distributor of Hall’s novel working for The Pegasus Press of rue Boulard, Paris, would have been a sure victim of the system, whether he/she/they won or lost. There was no provision for “legal aid” except in domestic and matrimonial disputes, and in criminal cases. Actually, even the accuser, if a private litigant, had to pay for the prosecution costs himself, and was not to be reimbursed, even if he won. As C. H. Rolph exquisitely phrases it, the law is telling any potential plaintiff “heads we win, tail you lose.” The English legal system “still pronounces, as did Anatole France’s *Crainquebille*, that ‘the law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread.’”<sup>2</sup> Although Radclyffe Hall was not – officially – the accused, she was eventually forced to sell her house due to the costs incurred because of the trial.

In an unsigned article published in the *New Statesman* on November 24, 1928, the anonymous author argued that “[t]he authoress, it seems to us, made two mistakes: first, in writing the book at all – for people who desire tolerance for pathological abnormalities certainly should not write about them – and, second, in deliberately inviting the judgment of the Home Office upon her work.” Nevertheless, Hall had not been consulted by Cape regarding the optional sending of the book to the Home Office for clearance, and it was precisely this action that brought *The Well* to the attention of the Director of Public Prosecutions. A wiser solution would have been to obtain unofficial clearance from the Attorney General, shows Rolph, “as Weidenfeld & Nicolson did when they wanted to publish *Lolita*.”<sup>3</sup>

On November 9, 1928 Bow Street Magistrates’ Court in the Covent Garden area of London hosted the opening scene of the famous trial, featuring the Home Secretary, an “unctuous, evangelical, insincere”<sup>4</sup> “sanctimonious Puritan”<sup>5</sup> called Sir William Joynson-Hicks, as initiator of the action, James Douglas of the *Sunday Express*

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Cecil Hewitt Rolph, introduction to *Radclyffe Hall. A Case of Obscenity?* by Vera Brittain, (London: Femina Books Ltd., 1968), 12–28, 23.

<sup>3</sup> Rolph, introduction to *Radclyffe Hall. A Case of Obscenity*, 25.

<sup>4</sup> These words, used by Harols Nicolson in his *Diaries* to refer to “Jix” are quoted by Brittain, in *Radclyffe Hall*, 85.

<sup>5</sup> Brittain, *Radclyffe Hall*, 86.

as instigator, and *The Well of Loneliness* as the defendant. As Vera Brittain explains, the defence was prepared by a famous firm of solicitors who, twenty-two years later, were to represent Penguin Books Ltd. “in defence of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, with a very different result.”<sup>1</sup> The Chief Magistrate, Sir Chartres Biron, a sixty-year old man “of conventional and restricted tastes”<sup>2</sup> refused to admit the defence’s question “In your opinion is this book obscene?”, thus imposing silence upon 40 witnesses who wanted to give evidence, and preventing the accused from being able to “show cause why the book should not be destroyed,” as they were required by law. Since Cape, scared by Douglas’s *Sunday Express* ruthless attack against *The Well*, had already informed the Home Secretary that he agreed to withdraw the book, this was viewed as an admission of guilt. Moreover, the fact that he subsequently sent the printing moulds to Paris for a reprint and then imported the books into England made things even harder for the defence attorneys.

Although George Bernard Shaw declared, after the trial, for the *Daily Herald*, that the book “ought not to have been withdrawn,” he declined the defence’s request to appear as witness in court, “on the ground that he was immoral himself.”<sup>3</sup> John Galsworthy, who was at the time President of the P. E. N. association (Poets, Playwrights, Essayists, Editors and Novelists), refused as well, and many other prominent figures did not testify, although they expressed their sincere support: E. M. Forster, Vita Sackville-West, as well as Leonard and Virginia Woolf, who, explains Brittain, “not understanding the nature of the proceedings which involved no personal defendant,” offered to bail out Radclyffe Hall “if the question of imprisonment arose.”<sup>4</sup>

The case was adjourned for a week, and the proceedings resumed on November 16, 1928. Whilst the editor of the *Sunday Express*, James Douglas, had emphatically stated, in his diatribe against *The Well of Loneliness*: “I would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel. Poison kills the body, but moral poison kills the soul.” Sir Chartres Biron declared that the book was obscene because in it “there is not one word which suggests that anyone with the horrible tendencies described is in the least degree blameworthy. All the characters are presented as attractive people and put forward with admiration.”<sup>5</sup> He ordered the destruction of the remaining copies, and sentenced each defendant to pay 20 guineas costs. Radclyffe Hall’s protests were in vain, since “[a]s the mere author of the book she was nobody.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, although they appealed, it was clear that “as the law then stood”<sup>7</sup> they stood no chance of winning. It was not surprising, therefore, though it must have been disappointing, that on December 14, 1928 Sir Robert Wallace, the Chairman, who had decided that “it would be ‘neither appropriate nor practicable’ for his fellow justices to read the book before hearing the Appeal,”<sup>8</sup> returned with the verdict in less than ten

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Brittain, *Radclyffe Hall*, 100.

<sup>6</sup> Rolph, introduction to *Radclyffe Hall*, 12–28, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Brittain, *Radclyffe Hall*, 101.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 118.

minutes, stating that the Appeal was “dismissed with costs”<sup>1</sup> because *The Well of Loneliness* “is a book which, if it does not condemn unnatural practices, certainly condones them, and suggests that those guilty of them should not receive the consequences they deserve to suffer.”<sup>2</sup>

And, thus, a book that contains absolutely no strands of purple prose, and almost nothing erotic, apart from several sentences, perhaps, such as: “[...] she kissed her full on the lips, as a lover”<sup>3</sup> and “[...] that night they were not divided,”<sup>4</sup> was condemned as an obscene libel and “burnt in the King’s furnace,”<sup>5</sup> simply because it depicts relationships of love between women.

According to Diana Souhami, had the book’s main character been a man, *The Well of Loneliness* “would have passed into oblivion as an unremarkable piece of period fiction,” since, as Virginia Woolf stated in November 1928, “The dullness of the book is such that any indecency may lurk there – one simply can’t keep one’s eyes on the page.”<sup>6</sup> Woolf’s *Orlando*, published that very year, enjoyed substantial critical acclaim, despite the fact that its main character is a fictionalized rendering of Woolf’s lover, Vita Sackville-West. Annie Sullivan argues that Woolf’s novel, which “seeks to overturn our systems of classification,” features Orlando as the embodiment of “all that Woolf found intriguing in Vita: her noble and romantic ancestry, for instance, her daring cross-dressing escapades, and her sexual and social mobility.”<sup>7</sup> But, unlike Radclyffe Hall, Virginia Woolf successfully employed the conventions of narrative fiction to avoid persecution while writing “the longest and most charming love-letter in literature, in which she explores Vita, weaves her in and out of the centuries, tosses her from one sex to the other, plays with her, [...], flirts with her, drops a veil of mist around her [...]”<sup>8</sup> Woolf managed to escape censorship because *Orlando*’s “lesbian allusions were too aerial and fantastic to invite scrutiny by the Home Secretary.”<sup>9</sup>

*The Well of Loneliness* had been scheduled to appear in the United States in October 1928, but its release was postponed when the news came out that copies of the book had been impounded on October 4 by Dover customs officials. After being held in legal custody for a fortnight, they were eventually released but only so that the Metropolitan Police could seize them, using Lord Campbell’s Obscene Publications Act of 1857. In France the book fared well, and sales were on the increase, so on December 15 Pascal Covici<sup>10</sup> and Donald Friede released it on the American market, which

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Diana Souhami, *The Trials of Radclyffe Hall* (New York: Doubleday, Random House Inc., 1999), xvii.

<sup>6</sup> Souhami, *The Trials of Radclyffe Hall*, xix.

<sup>7</sup> Annie Sullivan, “Resisting the Clock: Dissolving Time in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*” (2005), [http://serendip.brynmawr.edu/sci\\_cult/evolit/s05/web4/asullivan.html](http://serendip.brynmawr.edu/sci_cult/evolit/s05/web4/asullivan.html) (accessed December 12, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> These words belong to Vita Sackville-West’s son, Nigel. See Nigel Nicholson, *Portrait of a Marriage*, (London: Futura Publications Limited, 1974 [1973]), 209.

<sup>9</sup> Souhami, *The Trials of Radclyffe Hall*, xix.

<sup>10</sup> Born in 1888 in Botoșani, Romania, Pascal Covici immigrated with his parents to the United States in 1896. There he attended the University of Michigan and the University of Chicago, and

absorbed over 20,000 copies in less than a month. However, on January 22, 1929 Magistrate Hyman Bushel of the West Side Court was given two copies of the book, and charges were brought against the Covici-Friede firm for the violation of Section 1141 of the Penal Code, “relating to the circulation of indecent literature.” John S. Sumner, Secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, claimed to have received complaints that had urged him to confiscate the 865 copies that he had found at the publishing house.<sup>1</sup>

Deferred until February 5, the case was tried on April 8 and the court’s decision was made public on April 20 by the *New York Times*. At the beginning of the trial, the City Magistrate quoted from the People’s brief that *The Well of Loneliness* “is a well-written carefully constructed piece of fiction and contains no unclean words” but refused to dismiss the charges because, he explained, the characters who indulge in “unnatural and depraved relationships” are rendered in “attractive terms” and “it is maintained throughout that they be accepted on the same plane as persons normally constituted and that their perverse and inverted love is as worthy as the affection between normal beings, and should be considered just as sacred by society.”<sup>2</sup> Although the counterpart of Sir Chartres Biron deemed the book offensive to decency and to public morals, due to its anti-social subject matter, the defence attorneys were able to skilfully prove that according to definitions of the term previously upheld by the courts *The Well of Loneliness* was not obscene. Enjoying the support of publicly acclaimed personalities, such as Prof. Boris Sokoloff, Dr. Joseph Collins, Sinclair Lewis, Edna Ferber, Sherwood Anderson, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, Ernest Hemingway, Upton Sinclair and many others, the defence managed to record a crucial victory.<sup>3</sup> On the basis of America’s constitutional right to freedom of expression, Morris Ernst, one of the lawyers, rhetorically inquired: “who should or could determine the dangerous consequences of one subject rather than another? Would the ‘unorthodox emotional complications’ of *The Well of Loneliness* cause more havoc than sadism in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, abortion in *The American Tragedy*, the adulteries in contemporary fiction, or the murders, robberies and violence in crime novels?”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, since the book was rather long, requiring a significant amount of time and effort to read, “[n]o child, no moral defective, no impressionable seeker after prurient details would ever get far.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the court’s decision was that “[t]he book in question deals with a delicate social problem which, in itself, cannot be said to be in violation of the law unless it is written in such a manner as to make it obscene.”<sup>6</sup> As Diana Souhami points out, not only was Hall vindicated by the American verdict but, after the trial, Covici and Friede

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became a well-known editor and publisher. His partnership with McGee, which had begun in 1922, ended in 1925 and three years later he moved to New York and formed a new partnership with Donald Friede, specialising in limited editions. For more information, see “Texas Archival Resources Online,” <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/uthrc/00028/hrc-00028.html> (accessed May 4, 2011).

<sup>1</sup> Brittain, *Radclyffe Hall*, 140.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 142–145.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 146–147.

<sup>4</sup> Souhami, *The Trials of Radclyffe Hall*, xviii.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Brittain, *Radclyffe Hall*, 148.

published a “victory edition,” bookshop orders soared, translation rights were amassed, and Radclyffe Hall obtained royalty payments in the amount of \$64,000.<sup>1</sup> Eventually, the British ban on *The Well of Loneliness* was also overturned on appeal, but only after its author’s death.<sup>2</sup>

Considered by feminist critics and writers such as Del Martin and Jane Rule a “Lesbian Bible,”<sup>3</sup> most probably because it was, for such a long time, the only novel openly dealing with lesbianism, viewed by the American painter Romaine Brooks as “a ridiculous book, trite, superficial,” deemed by Violet Trefusis “a loathsome example” and by Vita Sackville-West a book which clearly proved that “a really good novel remains to be written on that subject,”<sup>4</sup> *The Well of Loneliness* contributed to the reinforcement of ‘abnormality’ as characteristic of homosexuals, encouraged the treatment of gays as victims of an inferior biology, and pushed many lesbians into the dangerous trap of congenital inversion, causing shame, despair and painful inner struggle to many a woman.

While Radclyffe Hall’s intentions might have been good, the result was devastating, as her book, meant to be a passionate plea for social toleration, brought into the literary realm what the psychoanalyst Thomas Szasz called the “ideological conversion from theology to science,” a conversion that took place in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>5</sup> Once just one kind of sin among many, homosexuality starts to be described as a type of behaviour in need of social control and psychiatric help. As Nicholas F. Radel points out: “The coercive force of science, then, deprives the homosexual of his ability to change, to alter his behaviour, or even to accept responsibility for freely choosing his sin. The physician ensures that the homosexual is a diseased victim, and the metaphor of illness clarifies his need for help and his dependence on others for that help. By defining the homosexual as ill, society can see itself as healthy; and in direct proportion to the gay community’s assertion of itself as a self-serving entity, society can view itself as ill and take all necessary steps to regain its health.”<sup>6</sup> This statement is coherent with the situation in our culture nowadays: objections brought to homosexuality are mainly related to its visibility. As long as gays and lesbians keep silent, stay out of the public eye, out of the limelight, locked within the walls of their closets, they are granted a certain amount of tolerance. This happens because, as Lynn C. Miller shows: “Silence denies the existence of difference and allows the dominant culture to believe that it is the only culture. It also, if chosen by a gay person, effectively denies the self. Silence in regard to homosexuality has been a major form of repression,

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<sup>1</sup> Souhami, *The Trials of Radclyffe Hall*, xviii.

<sup>2</sup> “Radclyffe Hall,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2011. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/252668/Radclyffe-Hall> (accessed May 4, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> See Raymond-Jean Frontain, ed., *Reclaiming the Sacred: the Bible in Gay and Lesbian Literature* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2003), 161.

<sup>4</sup> See Harriett Gilbert and Christine Roche, *A Women’s History of Sex* (London: Pandora Press, 1987), 178.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Szasz, *The Manufacture of Madness. A Comparative Study of the Inquisition and the Mental Health Movement* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 160.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas F. Radel, *Self as Other: The Politics of Identity in the Works of Edmund White*, in *Queer Words, Queer Images: Communication and the Construction of Homosexuality*, ed. Jeffrey R. Ringer (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994), 177.

both by homosexuals in choosing it and by the culture at large in denying homosexuality.”<sup>1</sup>

Given the conditions of a society dominated by widely-spread homophobic attitudes and arrant heterosexism, a society which condemns homosexuality to invisibility, Radclyffe Hall’s book may be said to have had a positive role as well, rather than merely a negative impact. The scandal did serve the lesbian cause, to a certain extent, as “for books to be real and remembered they have to be talked about. For books to be understood they must be examined in such a way that the basic intentions of the writers are at least considered.”<sup>2</sup> *The Well of Loneliness* thus put an end to the conspiracy of silence and increased the visibility of lesbian existence. This was extremely important, since, as Adrienne Rich pointed out, “invisibility is not just a matter of being told to keep your private life private; it is the attempt to fragment you, to prevent you from integrating love and work and feelings and ideas, with the empowerment that these can bring.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn C. Miller, *The Politics of Self and Other*, in *Queer Words, Queer Images: Communication and the Construction of Homosexuality*, ed. Jeffrey R. Ringer (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994), 212.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Smith, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*, eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury, New York: Feminist Press, 1982), 154.

<sup>3</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Invisibility in Academe,” in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (London: Virago Press, 1986), 199–200.