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# **An 'ordinary novel': Genre Trouble in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness***

## **Author**

Hannah Roche

## **Affiliations**

University of Leeds; Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

## **Contact information**

Email: [enher@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:enher@leeds.ac.uk)

Postal address: School of English, University of Leeds, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds,  
LS2 9JT

Telephone: 07841 480842

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## Abstract

Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* has long been read as stylistically inferior to novels by Hall's 'experimental' peers. Led by Virginia and Leonard Woolf, the dominant opinion has, to quote Terry Castle, sentenced Hall to a reputation of 'bad, bad, bad' writing.

This article takes issue with Hall's exclusion from modernism, raising questions about the relationship between political radicalism and stylistic familiarity. Was Hall cleverly turning to a Victorian mode in order to critique the politics of modernism, challenging the value of aesthetic experiment and obscurity? I argue not only that *The Well* is stylistically as impressive as the most celebrated of 'difficult' 1920s novels, but also that, by boldly appropriating an accepted (and heteronormative) genre, Hall makes a statement about the rightful position of lesbian writing that dares to strike its readers in ways more direct and profound than the audaciously avant-garde.

## Key words

Radclyffe Hall; genre; modernism; lesbian; romance

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The book, which is published at 15s, is quite out of the reach of a large proportion of this critic's readers. That is to say, they would not dream of paying this amount for what appears to them on the surface an ordinary novel.

--- The Newsagent, 25th August 1928<sup>1</sup>

As a 'tall, heavily built masculine-looking figure, with both her hair and her clothes cut man-fashion', Radclyffe Hall has long been central to debates surrounding gender ambiguity.<sup>2</sup> Yet the genre of Hall's work – the implications of her literary style, or the way in which her narratives were fashioned – has not faced the same degree of scrutiny. *The Well of Loneliness*, which was subject to an extraordinarily well-publicised obscenity trial in November 1928 and ultimately condemned on the grounds of its condonation of 'unnatural offences between women' and potential to corrupt, offended adversaries with both the radicalism of its sexual politics and the apparent conservatism of its prose.<sup>3</sup> For Sir Chartres Biron, the Chief Magistrate who ordered the destruction of *The Well*, the 'literary merit' of Hall's work intensified its malignancy: 'the better an obscene book is written the greater the public to whom the book is likely to appeal'.<sup>4</sup> When Hall appealed Biron's verdict a month

later, the Director of Public Prosecutions, Sir Archibald Bodkin, refused to provide magistrates with copies of the novel in question. According to Bodkin, who claimed to have acted ‘on the directions of the Chairman of the Court’, it was neither ‘appropriate nor practicable’ for attendant Justices to be granted access to *The Well*; instead, in Hall’s words, the ‘entire story of the book’ was narrated to the bench.<sup>5</sup> The style of *The Well* thus gave way to its plot, and the novel’s fate was determined not only by a man who considered its readability to render its content all the more toxic, but also, more ominously, by those who had not read it.

Although there is obviously much to contest in Biron’s crude assessment of *The Well*, the claim that Hall’s narrative style strengthens the novel’s potency is altogether reasonable. In the week following the initial call for the novel’s withdrawal from publication by James Douglas of the *Sunday Express*, both supporters and suppressors of *The Well*’s cause commented upon the excellence of its execution. The *Newsagent* reported ‘no doubt that the book is extremely well written’ (25<sup>th</sup> August 1928), whilst a journalist for the same day’s *Liverpool Post* admitted that he and four friends found Hall’s ‘horri-fying book’ to be ‘superb and poignant [...] in actual writing’. Others, however, have commented upon the unoriginality and lifelessness of Hall’s ostensibly formulaic style. Virginia Woolf, whose fantastical, destabilising tale of gender subversion, *Orlando*, was published to favourable reviews – and to no legal intervention – in the same year as *The Well*, famously considered Hall’s novel to offer its reader little reward: ‘[t]he dulness [sic] 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> Leonard Woolf had, before the trial, reviewed ‘Miss Hall’s novel’ for *The Nation* and *Athenaeum*, judging it to be ‘extremely interesting’ as a study of psychology but to ‘fail completely as a work of art’.<sup>7</sup> Over seventy years later, in the afterword to a 2001 collection of essays on *The Well*, lesbian scholar Terry Castle echoed the Woolfs’ sentiments – and neatly summed up the prevailing critical attitude towards Hall’s novel – opening with the line: ‘Oh god not again: *The Well of Fucking Loneliness*’.<sup>8</sup> More recently still, in the introduction to the 2008 Virago Modern Classics edition of *The Well*, Hall’s biographer Diana Souhami has bluntly presented the novel as ‘lacking in irony’ and its author as ‘no stylist’.<sup>9</sup>

Although Hall’s ‘ordinary’ prose style clearly differs from the boldly inventive writings of the mid-to-late 1920s queer female vanguard (Gertrude Stein’s epic *The Making of Americans* was published in 1925; H.D. wrote *Her* in 1927; and Djuna Barnes’s anonymous *Ladies Almanack* appeared in 1928), to dismiss *The Well*’s narrative as ‘unremarkable’ (Souhami, p. viii) invites debate. Certainly, as Hall’s fourth novel, *Adam’s*

Breed (1926), had achieved the ‘unusual honour’ of winning both the Prix Femina Vie Heureuse and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in the year before the publication of *The Well*, it is evident that Hall was entirely capable of producing stylistically ambitious and appealing works of fiction.<sup>10</sup> For reasons I will go on to discuss, it is equally important to note that in the wake of her *Adam’s Breed* triumph, Hall was firmly positioned at the top of literary London’s social ladder: on 16<sup>th</sup> July 1927, the *Daily Sketch* reported how Hall and her partner Una, Lady Troubridge ‘gave one of the most successful literary parties of the season at their lovely house in Kensington’, and several newspapers published the story of a rare compliment that was paid to the ‘monocled authoress’. Having lectured to the Writers’ Literary Circle on 17<sup>th</sup> January 1927, Hall was treated to a lavish dinner at Gatti’s Restaurant on the Strand, with a special menu of dishes and wines included in *Adam’s Breed*.<sup>11</sup> In brief, in the two years leading up to the publication of *The Well*, Hall was ‘known everywhere’ for her literary and sartorial flair: as the 4<sup>th</sup> January 1928 edition of the *Daily News* declared, Hall had become a ‘distinctive figure in the literary world of London [...] and one of the pioneers of the dinner jacket mode for women’.

Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, was publically reserved in both dress and matters Sapphic. Unlike Hall, the ‘shabby’ Woolf had long suffered a ‘clothes complex’ or ‘frock consciousness’ and, in the words of biographer Hermione Lee, ‘knew she would never be fashionable’.<sup>12</sup> At the time of *The Well*’s first trial, when her own fame had for months been ‘vulgar & a nuisance’, Woolf was composing a ‘discreet’ essay on the relationship between Geraldine Jewsbury and Jane Carlyle (‘Geraldine and Jane’), carefully evading any discussion of their intimacy.<sup>13</sup> Although she offered to testify in defence of *The Well*, Woolf eventually chose not to attend ‘the bloody womans [sic]’ appeal in December 1928, and went on to erase allusions to lesbianism from *A Room of One’s Own* (1929).<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, whilst Hall was basking in *Adam’s Breed*’s glory, reviewers of Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927) were marking its author as ‘not an inventive writer’ and ‘no more modern than Jane Austen’.<sup>15</sup> The form of the novel’s sentences, according to Woolf’s old adversary Arnold Bennett for the *Evening Standard* (23<sup>rd</sup> June 1927), was ‘rather tryingly monotonous’: a criticism that would, of course, be applied by Woolf to *The Well*. Most telling of all, perhaps, is not Woolf’s ‘dulness’ comment, nor her satirising of establishment prize-giving in Orlando, but rather that Leonard Woolf’s assessment of *The Well* as ‘los[ing] the whole in its parts’, with a laboured ‘trough’ in the middle of the book, echoes other reviewers’ critiques of *To the Lighthouse*. The *Spectator*’s Rachel A. Taylor considered Woolf’s novel ‘violently broken’ with ‘disproportionate parts’ (14<sup>th</sup> May 1927), and Edwin Muir for *The Nation* and

Athenaeum – where Leonard Woolf’s review of *The Well* would appear the following year – noted the novel’s individual merits whilst finding fault with its overall lack of congruity (2<sup>nd</sup> July 1927).

Given that Virginia Woolf, now routinely celebrated as the paradigmatic British woman writer of modernist sexualities, has so shaped perceptions of *The Well* – Souhami, for instance, weaves Woolf’s opinion of the novel into her introduction as though Hall’s ‘dulness’ were accepted fact – we might usefully speculate about the reasons behind both Woolfs’ criticism of Hall. Perhaps the Woolfs were not unimpressed by Hall but rather somewhat threatened? Was ‘Miss Hall’ simply more courageous and more confident than the self-conscious ‘Mrs. Woolf’? Most importantly, if the Woolfs had embraced Hall, would *The Well* now be read not as a ‘dull’ or ‘ordinary’ novel but as a significant intervention in a collective modernist project – and if so, what are the implications for lesbian modernism? In *Lesbian Modernism: Censorship, Sexuality, and Genre Fiction* (2014), Elizabeth English has argued that *The Well*’s trial forced writers to turn not only to experimental writing but to popular genres (fantasy, history, and crime) in order to evade censorship.<sup>16</sup> If that which is obscene is essentially that which is not obscure, did Hall deliberately adopt an ostensibly ‘ordinary’ or ‘palatable’ mode – as opposed to the historical fantasy of *Orlando*, for example – as a means of making a radical statement about the rightful place for lesbians in fiction? Was Hall, in truth, as stylistically savvy as the ‘high modernists’ who disdained and disowned her, and would we now read her as such if she hadn’t been bitten by the Woolfs?

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Leonard Woolf’s lack of interest in Hall, having ‘not read [her] two other books’ and deeming *The Well* ‘cliché[d]’ and ‘patch[y]’, was certainly not representative of broader opinion. Before James Douglas called for its suppression, *The Well* was successful in terms of sales, critical acclaim and public reception. Within a month of publication, Harrods and the Times Bookshop had sold all copies, and enthusiastic reviews had appeared in, among others, the Times Literary Supplement, the Daily Telegraph, and the Saturday Review. In spite of the considerable cost of a copy – 15s was thought to reflect the high seriousness and inaccessibility of the novel’s central theme – *The Well* attracted men and women from, in Hall’s words, ‘all classes of society’.<sup>17</sup> The portfolio of letters that Hall compiled in defence of her case included support from followers as diverse as ‘medical man’, ‘clergyman’, ‘German lady’ and ‘married coal-miner’. Internationally, the appeal of the novel was such that Troubridge would later write:

What nobody foresaw was that the re-publication in Paris would be followed by translation into eleven languages, by the triumph of the book in the United States of America and the sale of more than a million copies. The author herself would probably have felt less tired had she been able to look ahead, to read in advance some of the many thousands of letters that came to her later from men and women in every walk of life, of every age and every nationality in all parts of the world [...]. She would have felt less tired had she known that fourteen years after publication *The Well of Loneliness* in America alone would have a steady annual sale of over one hundred thousand copies.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, the controversy surrounding *The Well* may account for the initial surge in its popularity – amusingly, the *Daily Express* reported the story of a man who sold his first edition for £3 10s following the book's withdrawal, making a profit of nearly 400 percent – but Hall's selected readers were nonetheless impressed by the 'beautifully written and absorbingly interesting book' (reader from New York) and appalled by the *Daily Express*'s 'lurid sensations' ('married coal-miner').<sup>19</sup>

Thus, whilst its readability exposed the 'obscenity' of its theme, *The Well* evidently spoke to a mainstream audience in ways that more theoretical or abstrusely experimental texts would have failed to do. In writing a 'propaganda novel', as Hall termed it, the primary aim was not to showcase literary craft and innovation but to be 'entirely fearless' in the delivery of a vital ideological message:

Away with champions of the popular lost cause, unless they are ready to take up their pens in defence of the unpopular lost cause as well, ~~then only can they lay claim to courage.~~ [...] It should be for a cause which seems to him so urgent that it fills him with a mighty will to conquer, so that he forgets about possible fame and thinks only of the cause for which he is writing; so that he values his literary skill and ultimate success only in as much as they may be of service to the purpose in hand by making his defence more adequate, by doing full justice to the subject he has chosen.<sup>20</sup>

Yet 'literary skill' was, after all, as essential as fearlessness. Hall knew that the field of recognisable or outwardly 'ordinary' fiction would provide the most profitable ground within which to situate her 'dangerous' polemic. Morris Ernst, the lawyer who successfully

defended *The Well* in its North American trial (New York, April 1929), argued that, if Hall's protagonist had been a man, the novel would have been 'merely a rather over-sentimental bit of Victorian romanticism'.<sup>21</sup> Ernst's comment does not devalue or disparage Hall's work: rather, the fact that a defence lawyer's claim for *The Well* as telling an oft-revisited story – in spite of its lesbian hero(ine) – was held up in court, to positive effect, as a plea for sympathy with its author suggests that the familiarity of the novel's narrative served to moderate or legitimise its otherwise 'unnatural' content.

Above all, by styling her 'propaganda novel' as an 'over-sentimental' Victorian romance, Hall symbolically houses her lesbian protagonist in the previously exclusive sphere of the heterosexual. *The Well* therefore makes a political statement about the position of lesbians, and of lesbian writing, that dares to strike its readers in ways more direct and profound than the audaciously avant-garde. Early biographer Lovat Dickson observed that, at the time of writing *The Well*, the 'romantic idea still dominated the novel', and it was therefore 'natural for [Hall] to invent the sort of background common to so many of the late Victorian and Edwardian novels she had read as a child and a young woman'.<sup>22</sup> Claudia Stillman Franks, similarly, has written that 'the old fashioned format for prose fiction suited [Hall] well enough', ultimately suggesting that Hall 'settled' for tradition rather than risking innovation or originality.<sup>23</sup> But Hall's adoption of an 'unremarkable' or 'palatable' formula does not indicate indolence or lack of imagination; on the contrary, we might read the decision to appropriate an ostensibly 'ordinary' genre as a well-planned tactical ploy.

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To consider literary genres as traditionally gendered territories is useful in this context, as the 'Victorian romance' designation – which naturally aligns Hall's novel with the feminine, the middlebrow, and the domestic – is clearly incongruous with *The Well*'s content, which centres on the life of Stephen Gordon, a definitively masculine 'congenital invert'. As Katherine Mullin has observed, despite the canonical impact of works by a host of female writers (Woolf, Stein, H.D., Dorothy Richardson), modernism has all too often been presented as a 'virile and manly' movement.<sup>24</sup> Notwithstanding the considerable progress made by feminist reassessments of modernism – Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank* (1986) and Bonnie Kime Scott's *The Gender of Modernism* (1990) – the 'popular perception', Mullin argues, 'continues to see modernism as male' (p. 139).

The 'popular perception', too, has continued to see modernism as distinct from popular or 'palatable' literature. But, if we are to accept such a dichotomous and mutually exclusive model, where is the line to be drawn? In the recent *Transitions in Middlebrow*



Writing (1880-1930) (2015), Kate Macdonald and Christoph Singer have established that the sense of ‘an exclusive separation between works of British modernism and all that was not avant garde’ – in other words, a ‘normative and often very synchronic approach’ that seeks to demarcate clear boundaries between modernism and middlebrow fiction – is ‘unhelpful’.<sup>25</sup> Certainly, *The Well*’s detailed realism and attention to apparent trivialities immediately set the novel apart from the Victorian or ‘old-fashioned’ school.<sup>26</sup> Laura Green has argued that Hall’s novel is situated in an ‘in-between’ space where the Victorian and the modern overlap and interact.<sup>27</sup> Alternatively, we might claim that *The Well*’s strength lies not in an ‘in-between’ identity but rather in the means by which Hall adapts and transforms an accepted – and definitively heteronormative – genre. I would posit that Hall is purposely turning to a Victorian mode in order to critique the politics of modernism, challenging her ‘avant garde’ peers with a straightforward question: what does obscurity achieve?

In *Fashioning Sapphism* (2001), Laura Doan has shrewdly pointed out that Hall was ‘far more sophisticated and astute in [her] literary deployment of social science than critics have yet suggested’.<sup>28</sup> Doan’s discussion of the way in which ‘various identities, categories, and theories jostle beside one another’, with Hall creating a form of ‘sexological “stew”’ (p. 145) in her engagement with Havelock Ellis, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, is altogether apposite here. Parallel to Doan’s argument, not only would I argue that Hall is aesthetically more sophisticated and astute than critics have suggested, but also – to appropriate Doan’s phrasing – that *The Well*’s take on the traditional romance narrative is served to its readers as a curiously digestible ‘stylistic stew’. Derrida, in his essay on ‘The Law of Genre’ (1980), advances the theory that a text ‘participates in’ rather than ‘belongs to’ a specific genre. The French ‘genre’ refers, of course, to gender as well as literary genre, underlining correspondences with Doan’s work:

I submit for your consideration the following hypothesis: a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging.<sup>29</sup>

Derrida’s hypothesis is useful here, as despite the ‘Victorian romance’ tag, Hall’s novel ultimately presents problems to any close reader ‘bent on classifying’ (Derrida, p. 64). Instances where *The Well*’s narrative diverges from the (romantic) stylistic norm mark the novel as, like Stephen, a composite creation.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, geographical shifts in *The Well*

are often accompanied by changes in register: whereas events in England are characteristically outlined in purple prose, Stephen's relocation to Paris calls for an altogether more restrained narrative approach. The opening paragraph of the first Paris chapter (XXVIII) is in stark contrast to the beginning of the novel's third book heralding Stephen's arrival in London:

A pale glint of sunshine devoid of all warmth lay over the wide expanse of the river, touching the funnel of a passing tug that tore at the water like a clumsy harrow; but a field of water is not for the sowing, and the river closed back in the wake of the tug, deftly obliterating all traces of its noisy and foolish passing. The trees along the Chelsea Embankment bent and creaked in a sharp March wind. The wind was urging the sap in their branches to flow with a more determined purpose, but the skin of their bodies was blackened and soot clogged so that when touched it left soot on the fingers, and knowing this they were always disheartened and therefore a little slow to respond to the urge of the wind – they were city trees, which are always somewhat disheartened.<sup>31</sup>

It was Jonathan Brockett who had recommended the little hotel in the Rue St. Roch, and when Stephen and Puddle arrived one evening that June, feeling rather tired and dejected, they found their sitting-room bright with roses – roses for Puddle – and on the table two boxes of Turkish cigarettes for Stephen. Brockett, they learnt, had ordered these things by writing specially from London (p. 279).

The pointed dissimilarity between the elaborately personified trees of the first extract and the precise, unadorned roses in the second calls into question Souhami's claim that Hall was 'no stylist'. Although the Chelsea scene is written in 'lofty' prose, the sparse, matter-of-fact depiction of Stephen's first June evening in Paris challenges the commonly-held perception of Hall's style as, to quote Terry Castle, 'monstrously overwrought' (p. 398). The second passage above is more in keeping with the stark immediacy of the modernist project than with Victorian flourish and ornament. Indeed, Hall's style here mimics the 'scrupulous meanness' of James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) in its strict narrative economy.<sup>32</sup> The rhythms and lexical choice of the opening of the Paris chapter strikingly resemble the opening of Joyce's 'An Encounter':

It was Joe Dillon who introduced the Wild West to us. He had a little library made up of old numbers of *The Union Jack*, *Pluck* and *The Halfpenny Marvel*. Every evening after school we met in his back garden and arranged Indian battles.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, the lyrical description of the ‘disheartened’ city trees in the first passage – written in an aureate style typical of a large proportion of the novel – evidently bears more in common with modernist writing than readers have acknowledged. D.H. Lawrence, most notably, approaches nature in urban landscapes with a similar level of compassion and attention to detail. The ‘piercing medley’ produced by the wind-swept ash-tree in *Sons and Lovers* (1913) – ‘the cords of the great harp hummed, whistled, and shrieked’ – as Walter Morel drunkenly sets upon his wife denotes an investment in the interaction between human and natural life and would not appear out of place, thematically or stylistically, in Hall’s work.<sup>34</sup> Septimus Smith in Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) makes the ‘marvellous discovery’ that the human voice ‘can quicken trees into life’; Woolf then offers life to her London trees, ‘rising and falling with all their leaves alight and the colour thickening from blue to the green of a hollow wave’, in a style close to that adopted by Hall.<sup>35</sup> The considerable length of Hall’s sentences, in both quoted extracts, and the ubiquity of commas, semi-colons, and conjunctions as sentence openers throughout the novel urges the narrative forward with a fluidity that resembles Woolf’s stream of consciousness:

But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement (Mrs. Dalloway, p. 22).

And as though some mysterious cord stretched between them, Stephen’s heart was troubled at that very moment; intolerably troubled because of Morton, the real home which might not be shared with Mary (*The Well*, p. 391).

Woolf and Hall construct natural and corporeal connections in much the same way; in both novels, the recurring sentence starter ‘And’ functions as a ‘mysterious cord’ that binds observations together and tugs paragraphs forwards. As Woolf’s narrative voice is

simultaneously third-person and belonging to the psychologically unstable Septimus – ‘leaves were alive; trees were alive’ is the character’s perception, not the narrator’s – so too Hall creates a disparity or irony in the space between her narrator and the events that she is relaying.

For Terry Castle, a prime example of Hall’s ‘gruesome’ loftiness and ‘enunciatory awfulness’ (p. 395) can be found in the novel’s early description of Lady Anna as ‘the archetype of the very perfect woman’ (p. 13). Yet Hall’s narrator is not to be taken at her word. The voice mimics or parodies that of a romantic storyteller, introducing *The Well* as an ‘ordinary’ novel, but such ‘hideous’ (p. 395) writing is evidently not intended to be read straightforwardly. In the ‘Nausicaa’ episode of *Ulysses* (1922), Joyce parodies sentimental fiction, describing Gerty MacDowell as ‘in very truth as fair a specimen of winsome Irish girlhood as one could wish to see’.<sup>36</sup> Any difference in style between the depictions of Hall’s Anna and Joyce’s Gerty is difficult to detect: essentially, both writers introduce their character in a tone and register in which the character would wish to be introduced. But whilst Joyce’s irony – or ‘the Uncle Charles principle’ – is celebrated, Hall’s is entirely (dis)missed.<sup>37</sup>

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With its ‘stew’ of narrative styles and nuances, *The Well* clearly deviates from the Victorian romantic norm. The novel’s plot, too, encompasses elements of ‘the new’. Geographical movements in the novel – in particular, Stephen’s relocation to the Sapphic metropolis of Paris – mark common ground between *The Well* and a number of key lesbian modernist texts.<sup>38</sup> In the move from Morton, the archetypal English country house, to London to Paris, *The Well* progresses from the Victorian to the modern and, in doing so, shifts from the feminine (Stephen as daughter) to the masculine (Stephen as Mary Llewellyn’s lover). Stephen’s acceptance of Jonathan Brockett’s advice to ‘[g]et right away for a bit’ (p. 272), as she notes the ‘kind of echo of her thoughts’ in the idea to ‘[put] the sea between herself and England’ (p. 274), is remarkably akin to the experience of Stein’s lesbian protagonist in *Q.E.D.*, a novella written in 1903 but which remained closeted until 1950.<sup>39</sup> *Q.E.D.*’s Adele describes the open sea as ‘the most confined space in the world’ (p. 58), whilst Stephen laments ‘what a terrible thing could be freedom’ (p. 275).<sup>40</sup> For both Adele and Stephen, the necessity to travel forms an unavoidable part of the lesbian condition: sexual difference prompts geographical dislocation. Home, as Hall writes, was ‘the thing of all others that [Stephen] must fly from, that she must forget’ (p. 274).

Fundamentally, however, *The Well*'s plot adheres to the guidelines for romance as set out by both Rachel Blau du Plessis and Julie Abraham.<sup>41</sup> Hall's novel may not end happily for its heroine but if, as DuPlessis claims, a key 'cultural practice' of the romance is its conclusion in marriage or death (p. 4), then *The Well*'s final scenes satisfy expectations of the genre. Stephen metaphorically sacrifices herself as she resolves to forsake Mary:

They were calling upon the Mother of God: 'Sainte Marie, Mère de Dieu, priez pour nous, pauvres pêcheurs, maintenant et à l'heure de notre mort.'

'Et à l'heure de notre mort,' Stephen heard herself repeating (p. 507).

Green reads the novel's end as a 'step away from the conclusion of romance into the conclusion of the *künstlerroman*' (p. 292), as Stephen relinquishes Mary and resolves to write. Indeed, Abraham's claim that writers can '[take] the lesbian out of the heterosexual [romance] plot' by introducing a writer-protagonist who 'directs attention to the world beyond the novel' is clearly applicable here (pp.15-6). But, although Hall's reader is not privy to a wedding, the proposed marriage of Mary and Martin Hallam and Stephen's symbolic mort offer a rewriting, or a queering, of the two most common romantic endings as outlined by DuPlessis. Furthermore, Martin's 'victory' over Stephen indicates compliance with the prescribed notion that 'the romance plot muffles the main female character, represses quest, [and] valorizes heterosexual as opposed to homosexual ties' (DuPlessis, p. 5). Stephen's *bildung* or quest for self-realisation as an invert is ultimately abandoned, with other lesbian characters finding themselves stripped of their right to love and self-fulfilment by either an engagement (Mary) or death (Jamie and Barbara).

At the same time, the outcome of Hall's novel need not spell disaster for congenital inverts. Although Stephen's failure to be a man essentially results in the novel's unhappy ending, Hall's inclusion of Valérie Seymour – a character who expresses exasperation ("“Of all the curious situations I've ever been in, this one beats the lot!”") at Stephen's 'mad' decision to martyr herself (p. 508) – directs attention towards the possibility of a more promising conclusion for Hall's heroine.<sup>42</sup> The *Yorkshire Evening Post*'s detailed, and largely enthusiastic, review of *The Well* advanced the opinion that Hall 'loaded the dice a trifle heavy' against Stephen, with the novel's bleak ending signifying 'somewhat tiresome, because unnecessary, conventionality'.<sup>43</sup> I would suggest that Hall chooses a 'conventional' ending not only to evoke sympathy for her cause but also to emphasise the extent to which she is appropriating the institution of heterosexual romantic fiction.<sup>44</sup> By hinting towards

alternative outcomes but ultimately ending her novel with a proposed marriage and a metaphorical death, Hall foregrounds her deft manipulation of the genre's established 'rules'. Unlike those who favoured 'experiment', and instead of tracing a new (and obscure) path for Sapphic writing, Hall demonstrates how lesbian characters – and, indeed, lesbian writers – can occupy a genre previously reserved for heterosexuals.

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Whereas Woolf's novels have inevitably been read through the filter of her literary theory and criticism – *The Common Reader* was published in 1925, before *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando* – *The Well* has essentially stood for and by itself. That said, since 2008, newcomers to Hall's novel are likely to access a copy prefaced by Souhami's introduction, in which they will learn of *The Well*'s lack of irony and style and its author's 'distrust' of innovation (p. viii). It would be enlightening, in the absence of a Hall essay in the 'Modern Fiction' (Woolf, 1925) idiom, to consult Hall's lecture notes and musings on novel-writing in order to gain a more valuable understanding of Hall's engagement with, and investment in, the romance genre.

In March 1927, Hall gave a well-received lecture on 'True Realism in Fiction' at Sion College, London. A reviewer for *The Bookman* (April 1927) claimed that, by the end of the lecture, 'one was able to answer the question, "Can you imagine true?" in the affirmative'. In June 1927, several regional North American presses reprinted quotes from a lecture on 'American Authors in England' in which Hall enthusiastically extols the virtues of reading 'your Western romances': they allow the English public to 'escape to your stretching prairies; they love madly, live madly'.<sup>45</sup> In her biography of Hall, Troubridge recalls an evening during which she read Alison Uttley's *A Traveller in Time* (1939) aloud to her partner. The novel, as Troubridge remembers, 'filled us both with delight [...]. It had that quality which John [Hall] called "other-worldly" and which appealed to her above all others'.<sup>46</sup> Earlier, in a lecture on 'The Writing of Novels' (1933), Hall had stated that even when reading the most 'mystical' novels, she 'want[ed] plenty of good, solid mundane events'.<sup>47</sup> Given her investment in writers' and readers' abilities to 'imagine true', and her personal taste for both reality and escapism, Hall was of the opinion that the real and the romantic cannot be segregated into two opposing camps.

The 'other-worldly' quality favoured by Hall corresponds with the defining features of romantic fiction according to commentators as diverse as Henry James and Fredric Jameson. In the preface to *The American* (1907), James summarises romance as that which 'we never can directly know; [...] that which deals with experience liberated [...] from the conditions

that we usually know to attach to it'.<sup>48</sup> Jameson, in an essay on 'Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre' (1975), claims that the romance narrative is shaped by the 'ideological phenomenon [...] of Otherness' – in short, the binary opposition of good and 'evil', with evil simply signifying that which is 'Other, alien, different, strange, unclean, and unfamiliar'.<sup>49</sup> To note a novel's romantic attributes is not, for James or Jameson, to suggest that its story is necessarily implausible or fanciful: the events within a novel may be classed as 'other' simply in their distinction from the everyday. For Hall, writing a novel that would detail the social exclusion of an 'outlandish' (p. 110) figure, the romance narrative's tension between 'good' and 'other' was there to be exploited: in *The Well*, that which is other is ultimately good. The endeavour to 'liberate' experience from conditions imposed by cultural norms is in line with Stephen's call for God to grant 'the right to our existence' (p. 512) at the end of the novel; in this sense, the conclusion of *The Well* is remarkably consonant with the objective of romance as James perceives it. If romance encapsulates 'the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and desire' (James, p. 32) and that which is 'Other' (Jameson), then the suitability of the romance genre for a writer of a 'lesbian novel' is clear. Whilst it may, to some, indicate an unsophisticated excess of sentimentality or 'overwrought' style, the 'romantic' label signifies that which is enigmatic and unreachable but which resides within. In its very nature, romance is queer.

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By purposely positioning *The Well* in the arena of conventional romance, Hall raises important and exciting questions about the relationship between political radicalism and aesthetic familiarity. In staking a queer claim on Victorian romance, Hall was arguably more experimental – and more playful – than the (re)creative modernists who shunned her work.

For Adam Parkes, humour and 'theatricality' separate *The Well* from *Orlando*. It is, Parkes claims, 'easy to see how such works as *Orlando* [...] escaped censure at a time when Hall's notoriously laughterless novel came under scrutiny'.<sup>50</sup> But is it fair to deem *The Well* 'laughterless'? Its theme is certainly sobering, but Hall's natural tendency towards comic prose is striking: the precocious Violet Antrim and camp Jonathan Brockett are caricatures; exchanges between the young Stephen and Mademoiselle Duphot are typified by humour; and the first meeting between Stephen and Angela Crossby – which sees Angela's attempt to intervene in a fight between an Airedale and a West Highland terrier, 'carrying her parasol as though it were a lance with which she intended to enter the battle' (p. 153) – borders on farce. Of course, there is despondency in *The Well*'s comedy: one supporter wrote that the 'delicacy, sadness and delightful sense of humour made me vow never to smile at these

unfortunate people again'.<sup>51</sup> Yet Hall, again, subverts expectations: whilst *The Well* is a 'serious' book, it nonetheless offers the 'relief of comedy' so valued by Woolf.<sup>52</sup>

Laura Doan has already established that Hall's deployment of sexological science was far more complex and consequential than critics had acknowledged. My reading of *The Well*'s genre identity dovetails with Doan's work in its recognition of Hall's stylistic astuteness; moreover, if genres are to be understood as gendered institutions, then an analysis of *The Well* as a queer reworking of 'feminine' romance announces a new relationship between the novel's aesthetics and its sexually subversive theme. Terry Castle, as likely mouthpiece for legions of lesbian readers, has expressed embarrassment at the 'adolescence' of *The Well* – echoing Leonard Woolf by noting 'its manifest failures as work of art' (p. 400) – whilst embracing the novel's sexual politics: 'Ugh! Pooh! Ahem! But also the first and most unflinching celebration of that form of erotic joy that happens to be one's own. [...] The hell with being tasteful and artsy and a great writer!' (p. 402).

Castle's conclusion prompts speculation. How differently would lesbian communities – particularly those 'embarrassed' adolescents whose coming-out stories have been shaped by *The Well* – now read Hall if modernists had claimed her as 'a great writer'? And, perhaps more importantly, how differently would we now read the gender of modernism if Hall's 'ordinary novel' were counted among its texts? There is, I would argue, a key question that critics have failed to consider: was the evasion of censorship particularly high on Hall's political and literary agenda? Hall's reflection on 'The Writing of Novels' (1933) would suggest not:

[W]hether [the author] has his reward or not, he will at least have something fine to live with; he will always know that he has given of his strength in order to help and fortify others. If he adds but one stone, however small, to the building of a better civilization, then that in itself is a glorious thing. [...] Persecution is very often the road by which a goal is ultimately reached --- the field must submit to being torn by the plough before it can hope to bear a rich harvest.

If we can reasonably accept Hall's 'persecution' as a marker of success in writing a fearless and provocative 'propaganda novel', then a discussion of Orlando's censor-evading merits is somewhat immaterial. What is significant, in reading Hall alongside Woolf, is not that Hall 'failed' to outsmart censors but rather that her 'dull' and 'ordinary' novel might be



considered, stylistically speaking, to be as boldly experimental as the most avant-garde of 1920s fiction.

**Words: 8,007**

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<sup>1</sup> All 1927 and 1928 reviews and press reports on Hall cited in this article, apart from *The Nation* and *Athenaeum*, were accessed at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin (Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge Papers; collection henceforth cited as HRC). I am grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council's International Placement Scheme for funding a three-month fellowship at the HRC. For access to *The Nation* and *Athenaeum* archives, I owe thanks to the Inter-Library Loans Team at City University London.

<sup>2</sup> *The Sporting Times* (25<sup>th</sup> August 1928). Among the North American and Canadian press clippings in Una Troubridge's *Adam's Breed* scrapbook (1927-8) is a photograph of Hall with the heading 'MALE OR FEMALE?' (source unknown). See also Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Transcript of *The Director of Public Prosecutions v. Jonathan Cape and Leopold Hill*, Bow Street Police Court, 9 November 1928 (The Lovat Dickson bequest, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa).

<sup>4</sup> Sir Chartres Biron, Chief Magistrate, 'Judgment' (Friday, 16<sup>th</sup> November 1928), in *Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on The Well of Loneliness*, ed. by Laura Doan and Jay Prosser (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 39-49 (p. 41).

<sup>5</sup> Sir Archibald Bodkin, 'Letter to Sirs, 27<sup>th</sup> November 1928' (HRC); the HRC houses multiple typed copies of an undated letter in which Hall, clearly ironically, informs non-attendees that Bodkin's enclosed missive may '[throw] light on the Government's legal (?) procedure'.

<sup>6</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, early November 1928', in *A Change of Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf 1923-28*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, 5 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977), III, p. 556.

<sup>7</sup> Leonard Woolf, 'The World of Books: The Well of Loneliness', *The Nation and Athenaeum* (4<sup>th</sup> August 1928).

<sup>8</sup> Terry Castle, 'Afterword: It was Good, Good, Good', in *Palatable Poison*, pp. 394-402 (p. 394).

<sup>9</sup> Diana Souhami, 'Introduction', in *Radclyffe Hall, The Well of Loneliness* (London: Virago Modern Classics, 2008), pp. vii-xii (p. viii).

<sup>10</sup> The Holyoke Transcript (15<sup>th</sup> February 1928). Reporting on *The Well's* withdrawal from circulation, a journalist for the *Birmingham Gazette* wrote: 'Seeing that the author was awarded the "Femina Vie Heureuse" prize last year for her story of an Italian waiter in London, "Adam's Breed," this criticism on a high note was not regarded very seriously, especially as most of the reviewers found nothing questionable in the author's treatment of a difficult and admittedly unpleasant subject' (24<sup>th</sup> August 1928). The Prix Femina is awarded annually to the author of 'the best English novel' ('Radclyffe Hall Wins Femina Prize', *Toledo Times*, January 16<sup>th</sup> 1927). The James Tait Black Memorial is awarded to 'the best novel, or book of that nature, of each year' ('A Novel and a Prize', *Sunday Times*, 25<sup>th</sup> December 1927). After its Prix Femina success, *Adam's Breed* was made available in the popular pocketsize 3s 6d edition (*Sunday Times*, 20<sup>th</sup> February 1927).

<sup>11</sup> *Books of Today and Tomorrow* joked that 'several Scotch novelists are already hard at work on books in which haggis and whisky have prominent mention' (April 1927).

<sup>12</sup> Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage Books, 1999), p. 462. Woolf's 'frock consciousness' was written in to a story called 'The New Dress', composed in between *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* (Lee, p. 462).

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<sup>13</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), III, p. 183; see Lee, p. 513.

<sup>14</sup> 'I was very much upset to think you had been angry that I didn't go to the bloody womans trial'. Virginia Woolf, 'Letter to Vita Sackville-West, 14<sup>th</sup> December 1928', in *Letters*, p. 563. Lee writes about the 'self-censorship' of *A Room of One's Own* in pp. 518-20.

<sup>15</sup> Orlo Williams, *Monthly Criterion* (July 1927); Conrad Aiken, 'The Novel a Work of Art', *Dial* (July 1927). All Woolf reviews were accessed in *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin (London: Routledge, 1975).

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth English, *Lesbian Modernism: Censorship, Sexuality and Genre Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Radclyffe Hall, 'General Remarks' (undated, HRC). 'The story deals with a subject that is scarcely suitable for general reading, and this seems to have been realized by the author and her publishers, for the book was marketed at 15s'. *The Birmingham Argus* (24<sup>th</sup> August 1928). According to the *Swindon Evening Advertiser*, 15s was 'twice [the price] of an ordinary novel' (25<sup>th</sup> August 1928).

<sup>18</sup> Una, Lady Troubridge, *The Life and Death of Radclyffe Hall* (London: Hammond, Hammond and Co., 1961), p. 94.

<sup>19</sup> '400 PER CENT. PROFIT.', *Daily Express* (September 1928). Troubridge, as collector of Hall's press clippings, has written '!!!' after *Daily Express*, clearly to denote amusement at the article's appearance in the sister paper to Douglas's *Sunday Express*.

<sup>20</sup> Radclyffe Hall, 'The Writing of Novels' (HRC). Read for the English Club, Oxford, February 24<sup>th</sup> 1933 and for the Literary Society, University College, University of London, March 2<sup>nd</sup> 1933.

<sup>21</sup> Morris Ernst, 'Brief for the Defense' (HRC).

<sup>22</sup> Lovat Dickson, *Radclyffe Hall at the Well of Loneliness: A Sapphic Chronicle* (London: William Collins Sons and Co. Ltd., 1975), pp. 128-9.

<sup>23</sup> Claudia Stillman Franks, *Beyond The Well of Loneliness: The Fiction of Radclyffe Hall* (Amersham: Avebury Publishing Company, 1982), p. ix.

<sup>24</sup> Katherine Mullin, 'Modernisms and Feminisms', in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 136-52 (p. 139).

<sup>25</sup> *Transitions in Middlebrow Writing, 1880-1930*, ed. by Kate Macdonald and Christoph Singer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> A critic for *Life and Letters* (September 1928) wrote that he 'would have preferred a briefer account of the inessential part of the hero's [sic] life, the shirts, ties, underclothes he bought and the way he decorated his rooms'.

<sup>27</sup> A small number of critics have detected elements of modernism in *The Well*. Loralee MacPike reads Stephen's lover, the feminine invert Mary Llewellyn, as an entirely 'new' and therefore modernist creation, and both Joanne Winning and Laura Green have made convincing claims for Hall's construction of Stephen Gordon's identity as characteristically modernist. Green's work is most pertinent here, particularly in its recognition of both Victorian and modern models of identity in *The Well* (p. 280), but, in the critic's own words, the essay's concern is not with 'identifying canonically "modernist" moments in or aspects of Hall's text' (p. 293). As MacPike, too, avoids a discussion of 'modernist moments' – arguing that *The Well* is 'elegiacally Latinate in diction' (p. 75) – and Winning's concern is primarily with points of thematic and structural comparison between Hall's work and that of other female novelists, there is clearly further analysis to be done. See Laura Green, 'Hall of Mirrors: Radclyffe Hall's "The Well of Loneliness" and Modernist Fictions of Identity', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 49.3 (Autumn 2003), 277-97; Loralee MacPike, 'Is Mary Llewellyn an Invert? The Modernist Supertext of *The Well of Loneliness*', in *Unmanning Modernism: Gendered Re-Readings*

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(Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1997), pp. 73-89; and Joanne Winning, 'Writing by the Light of The Well: Radclyffe Hall and the Lesbian Modernists', in *Palatable Poison*, pp. 372-93.

<sup>28</sup> Doan, p. 130. Aside from its prosecutors, those who took issue with Hall's novel were largely affronted not by its narrative style but by the 'unsuitability of subject to form': the supposed incompatibility of the scientific and the literary. A writer for the *Daily Sketch*, maintaining that the novel form in general had become 'over-ripe' and 'decaying by its own licence', posited the claim that sexual inversion could 'only be treated fairly in logical or scientific argument' (25<sup>th</sup> August 1928); the previous day, under the subheading 'The Decadence of the English Novel', the *Catholic Times* had argued that *The Well* 'deals with a subject that might well be left to technological treatises'.

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', trans. by Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry*, 7.1 (Autumn 1980), 55-81 (p. 57, p. 65).

<sup>30</sup> Doan observes how 'Hall grasped that sexology itself was not a unified and coherent body of knowledge but was comprised of diverse and at times awkwardly conflicting theoretical positions' (2001, p. 130); Stephen Gordon is, as Hall's representative 'invert', as diverse and as awkwardly conflicting as sexology itself.

<sup>31</sup> Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (Paris: Pegasus Press, 1928), p. 245. All page numbers refer to this edition.

<sup>32</sup> James Joyce, 'Letter to Grant Richards, 5<sup>th</sup> May 1906', in *The Letters of James Joyce*, ed. by Richard Ellman, 3 vols (New York: Viking, 1966), VII, p. 134.

<sup>33</sup> James Joyce, *Dubliners* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 11.

<sup>34</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* (New York: Random House, 1922), p. 73. *Adam's Breed*, too, bears distinct similarities to Lawrence's novel.

<sup>35</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1981), p. 22.

<sup>36</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 333.

<sup>37</sup> See Hugh Kenner, *Joyce's Voices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 15-38.

<sup>38</sup> Winning notes that 'The Well and lesbian modernism are populated by the same key figures. Natalie Barney, for instance, appears as Valérie Seymour in Hall's text and as Dame Evangeline Musset in Djuna Barnes's satirical *Ladies Almanack*' (p. 374). Barnes's *Almanack* was published in the same year as *The Well*; the later *Nightwood* (1936) provides a further example of a 'lesbian novel' featuring relocation to Paris.

<sup>39</sup> Gertrude Stein, Q.E.D., in *Fernhurst, Q.E.D., and Other Early Writings*, ed. by Leon Katz (New York: Liveright, 1973), pp. 52-133.

<sup>40</sup> Earlier in the novel, Puddle describes the sea as 'rather terrible but splendid' (p. 84).

<sup>41</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Julie Abraham, *Are Girls Necessary? Lesbian Writing and Modern Histories* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>42</sup> Even Martin, Stephen's rival, acknowledges that '[a] few may survive relationships as yours' (p. 498).

<sup>43</sup> *The Yorkshire Evening Post* (24<sup>th</sup> August 1928).

<sup>44</sup> Claudio Guillén establishes the 'metaphor of [social] institution' as a useful means of understanding genre in *Literature as System: Essays Toward the Theory of Literary History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 66.

<sup>45</sup> 'Western Novels Liked in England'. This article appeared in various North American newspapers on numerous dates in June 1927 (HRC).

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<sup>46</sup> p. 149. Interestingly, the Clifton Chronicle (1<sup>st</sup> September 1927, HRC) published a list of Hall's favourite contemporary novels, which included Margaret Irwin's *Still She Wished for Company* (1924), Helen Beauclerk's *The Green Lacquer Pavilion* (1925), and Edna Ferber's *Show Boat* (1926). All novels on Hall's list incorporate exotic geographical and/or imaginary temporal shifts.

<sup>47</sup> 'The mystical element, if it is to convince me, must be almost tenuous, and yet so strong that the introduction of mundane events never for one moment dispels or breaks it. I want plenty of good, solid mundane events, otherwise I incline to feel that the book could not apply to my everyday life, and this invariably disappoints me. I want the book to apply to me, if it could not then I lose my sense of escape, and with that my very reason for reading'. 'The Writing of Novels' (delivered at the English Club, Oxford, February 24<sup>th</sup> 1933, and the Literary Society, University College, University of London, March 2<sup>nd</sup> 1933).

<sup>48</sup> Henry James, 'Preface to *The American* (Volume II in the New York Edition)', in *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* [1934] (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), pp. 20-39 (p. 32).

<sup>49</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre', *New Literary History*, 7. 1 (1975), 135-163 (pp. 140-1).

<sup>50</sup> Adam Parkes, *Modernism and the Theater of Censorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 147.

<sup>51</sup> 'Letter from Florida' (undated, HRC).

<sup>52</sup> '[A]s Woolf wrote in the long essay composed at the same time as *Orlando*, "Phases of Fiction," comedy may restore some much-needed sanity after an excursion into romance, the genre to which *The Well of Loneliness* belongs: "how it [romance] needs the relief of comedy; how the very distance from common human experience and strangeness of its elements become ridiculous"' (Parkes, p. 162). 'Phases of Fiction' is in vol. 2 of Woolf's *Collected Essays*, ed. by Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1966), pp. 56-102.