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**SAPPHISM AND GENDER IN VIRGINIA WOOLF AND RADCLYFFE HALL**

SAPFISMUS A GENDER VE VIRGINII WOOLF A RADCLYFFE HALL

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## **Abstract (ENG)**

The primary focus of this thesis is on the elements of Sapphism (lesbianism) and gender as present in the Virginia Woolf novels *Mrs Dalloway* and *Orlando: A Biography*, as well as the novel *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall. It also includes information about the authors' backgrounds that bear some relevance to the queer aspects of their work. The interpretation of the aforementioned text is mostly done through a queer and transfeminist and intersectional feminist lens (the author being a transgender woman), although some time is spent arguing with the past interpretations by lesbian feminists and literary critics who, in the author's opinion, intentionally erased or accidentally overlooked relevant information that would make some of the texts not qualify as works of lesbian fiction.

This thesis challenges the idea that Clarissa Dalloway is somehow a closeted lesbian who was forced by society to give up on her romantic relationship with Sally Seton and was made to agree to a heterosexual marriage. While the text does suggest that she was not able to further pursue and deepen her relationships with Sally and some other women, in large part because of social norms regarding same-gender relationships, there is not enough textual evidence to support that Clarissa is a lesbian, especially since she at several points throughout the book talks about feelings of attraction she has towards some of the men around her. As such, labelling Clarissa a lesbian and *Mrs Dalloway* a work of lesbian fiction (which also requires a similarly inaccurate labelling of Virginia Woolf) results in bisexual erasure which is something that some members of the queer community uphold even today.

In regard to *Orlando: A Biography*, the focus is not so much on the critical response to the novel, but more on how gender-essentialist notions are brought up and challenged in the text. Woolf clearly distinguishes between "sex" and "gender" within the novel (despite using the term "sex" in reference to both) and applies that distinction in situations that put to question the contemporary ideas about both. Whether it is in questioning the idea of physical sex by making the sex of certain characters temporary hidden or indiscernible (or changing it entirely, as is the case for Orlando), or applying traits typically associated with masculinity to female-bodied characters and vice versa, or the presence of characters whose gender identities are comprised of a combination

feminine and masculine traits, effectively making them non-binary in the contemporary sense, Woolf is unparalleled among her contemporaries.

Lastly, and perhaps the most controversially, this thesis proposes and expands on the idea that rather than being a butch lesbian woman, as is generally accepted, Radclyffe Hall can more accurately be described as a person on the trans masculine spectrum. This is supported by a pool of a biographical evidence, such as Una Troubridge's biography of Hall, written shortly after Hall's death and a modern biography written by Diana Souhami. The idea of trans masculinity is then applied to *The Well of Loneliness*, where it shows how strongly some of the (potentially) trans masculine characters subscribe to traditional gender norms regarding femininity and masculinity, resulting in a distinct presence of femmephobia (the fear and ridicule of femininity) and toxic masculinity.

### **Abstrakt (CZE)**

Tato práce se soustředí primárně na aspekty saphismu (lesbianismu) a genderu, které se objevují v románech Virginie Woolf *Paní Dallowayová* a *Orlando* a v románu *Studna samoty* od Radclyffe Hall. Zároveň také obsahuje ty biografické informace o Woolf a Hall, které jsou nějakým způsobem relevantní pro analýzu queer aspektů jejich díla. Interpretace zmíněných třech románů je prováděna primárně za užití queer, intersekcionalně feministických a transfeministických perspektív (autorka je trans žena), avšak část práce je věnována argumentaci s lesbickými feministkami a literárními kritičkami, které, dle názoru autorky, záměrně vymazaly nebo omylem přehlédly relevantní informace, které by měly za následek to, že dané texty by nebylo dále možné nadále klasifikovat jakožto lesbické romány.

Tato teze argumentuje proti interpretaci Clarissy Dalloway jakožto potlačené lesby, kterou společnost donutila vzdát se romantického vztahu se Selly Seton a vnutila do heterosexuální sňatku. Ačkoliv text naznačuje, že Clarissa nebyla schopna prohloubit své vztahy se Sally a jinými ženami, z velké části kvůli společenským normám ohledně vztahů mezi osobami stejného genderu, text neobsahuje dostatek důkazů proto, že by Clarissa byla lesba, obzvláště vzhledem k tomu, že v mnohých částech knihy Clarissa mluví o tom, jak ji někteří muži kolem ní přitahují. Z tohoto důvodu má označení Clarissy jakožto lesby a označení *Paní Dalloway* za lesbický román (pro což by bylo podmínkou i podobně nepřesné označení Virginie Woolf samotné) za následek

vymazání bisexuality, což je něco, co někteří členové a členky queer komunity nadále praktikují.

Co se týče románu *Orlando*, tak se tato práce nesoustředí na kritické ohlasy k němu, ale především na to, jakým způsobem jsou v textu presentovány a narušovány genderově-normativní názory. Woolf v tomto díle jasně rozlišuje mezi „pohlavím“ a „genderem“ (a to i přesto, že označení „pohlaví“ užívá pro obojí) a aplikuje tyto dva koncepty na situace, které destabilizují tehdejší percepce obou. Ať již jde o destabilizace otázky fyzického pohlaví tím, že pohlaví některých postav je dočasně skryto nebo jej nelze s jistotou určit (nebo kompletně změněno, jako u Orlando), nebo aplikování aspektů tradičně spojovaných s maskulinitou na osoby ženského pohlaví, nebo přítomnost postav jejichž genderové identity jsou tvořeny kombinací femininních a maskulinních vlastností, což je z dnešního pohledu prakticky tvoří nebinárními, nejsou Woolf žádni její současníci a současnice konkurovat.

A v závěru, co je možná nejkontroverznějším aspektem této práce, se rozpracovává myšlenka, že v případě Radclyffe Hall nešlo o maskulinní lesbickou ženu, jak se obecně uznává, ale spíše o někoho, koho by přesněji šlo označit jakožto osobu na trans maskulinním spektru. Tento názor podporují životopisné údaje, jako třeba ty, které se objevují v životopise, který brzy po smrti Hall napsala Una Troubridge, a v moderním životopise Hall od Diane Souhami. Tento koncept trans maskulinity je poté aplikován na román *Studna samoty*, kde poukazuje na to, jak silně se některé (potenciálně) trans maskulinní postavy v textu drží tradičních genderových norem týkajících se femininity a maskulinity, což má za následek výraznou přítomnost femmefobie (strachu z femininity a její zesměšňování) a toxické maskulinity.

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## **1. Introduction**

The general aim of this thesis is to discuss the questions of gender and Sapphism (lesbianism) as they pertain to the works of Virginia Woolf, with specific focus on the novels *Mrs Dalloway* and *Orlando: A Biography*, and Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness*. These novels will be analysed predominantly in terms of how they construct gender and lesbian desire and the interaction between these two elements.

Some attention will be given to the lives of these two writers and how their experiences of queerness may have informed the ways in which lesbianism and gender are presented and structured within their works, as well as to the broader historical and literary context in which the novels were written – the development of queer life and sexology around Europe in the 1920s and 1930s (most notably in Berlin).

While queerness is the main focus of this thesis, I will also try and look at other things that may be relevant to analyse in terms of the idea of intersectionality, where privilege is considered along several (and potentially limitless) different axes. For these two authors, it will be especially relevant to look at how class affects their and their characters' perspectives on queerness and how their position as members of the upper-class society allows them to live queer lives in relative comfort compared especially to those for whom living queer lives would often mean exile and poverty (as is the case for Barbara and Jamie in *The Well of Loneliness*).

Additionally, I will, on occasion, use contemporary queer women's fiction as points of comparison and contrast. This will also serve as a way to discuss the question of continuous development of what may be called "lesbian aesthetics" between then and now.

My general methodological approach will be one of observation, analysis and comparison – primarily through a contemporary intersectional feminist, queer and transfeminist lens. While queer theory may be used in places to discuss certain elements of the text, it is not the primary theoretical background of this text.

## **2. Virginia Woolf**

### **2.1. Background**

Unlike Radclyffe Hall, Virginia Woolf is a household name for almost everybody who has studied or has a general interest in English literature. Being such a prominent and interesting figure of English literature has, naturally, led to a lot of interest not only in her work, but also her life. It is, then, perhaps here where I should note that I am not a strict adherent to Roland Barthes' idea of "the death of the author" and while I do recognise that there should be a certain degree of separation between a text and its author, it is also important to recognise that all literary texts are the products of human hands and minds – minds that have potentially infinite capacities for imagination, but which often end up thinking about things that have a particular personal relevance to them. In this sense, while I certainly do not think it is fair to interpret all of Virginia Woolf's works as autobiographical or even semi-autobiographical, it is relevant to keep in mind that, as many of us do, she wrote primarily about the things she cared and thought about, in some cases, due to her first-hand experiences.

For this particular case, the most important elements of Virginia Woolf's background are those that have to do with queerness and intersectionality more broadly:

The first thing that I think must be noted is that Virginia Stephen was born into the upper-class Stephen family. Her father, Sir Lesley Stephen was a prominent critic and biographer, best known today as the first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. While it is true that young Virginia did not receive as much formal education as she would have desired, she was encouraged by her father to peruse his extensive library, which she did gleefully.<sup>1</sup> It is at this point that her life starts to diverge from that of regular upper-class young woman of the time. Unable to attend Cambridge University like her brothers did, she could at least hone her writing and critical skills at home and at the Ladies' Department of King's College in London, which was an opportunity not many upper-class young women had at the time, let alone those belonging to the middle or the working class. It was not only her personal talent that allowed her to become a great writer, but it was also the privilege of having a supportive

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<sup>1</sup> Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997) 142

father who was rich enough to pay for her above-average education and who had a personal library of diverse literature.

Of course, there are stories of other writers, who grew up without the economic security and abundance of a family like the Stephens. Jeanette Winterson, a very prominent writer of contemporary queer women's fiction, was self-educated in a way that at the same time was similar to Woolf's, but was also worlds apart. In her memoir, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*, Winterson details how, living under her extremely religious adoptive mother, she was not allowed to own or borrow books that were in any way deemed inappropriate to a young Christian woman. (Her mother would even alter the narratives of books like *Jane Eyre* while reading them to Winterson to make them more in line with her own religious beliefs.) Unable to contain her desire to learning, however, Winterson would sneak into the public library and read unapproved books freely on the sly, starting at the letter A, as she was unsure where else to start reading.<sup>2</sup> In a way, Winterson's education could almost be seen as a working-class parallel to Woolf's.

But in order to gain a truly intersectional understanding of Virginia Woolf's background, we must also take into account her neurodiversity.<sup>3</sup> Virginia suffered her first mental breakdown at the age of thirteen. The prevailing theory behind the development of these reoccurring breakdowns is that they were the result of the trauma she sustained during the death of her mother when she was thirteen and the deaths of other people close to her that followed a few years later. Her emotional trauma and subsequent instability was further exasperated by the sexual abuse she (and her sister Vanessa) suffered at the hands of their two half-brothers. For the rest of her life, she was plagued by recurring mental breakdowns and long bouts of depression, which deeply affected her and Leonard's, her husband's, personal lives. In the final note she left before her suicide on 28 March 1941, she places quite a lot of emphasis on the strain her breakdowns and depresses have had on Leonard:

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<sup>2</sup> Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (London: Vintage, 2012) 124

<sup>3</sup> "Neurodiversity" is a term that seeks to describe what is commonly referred to as "mental illness" or "mental disability" in a way that avoids any ableist judgement and the othering of neurodiverse people from those who are neurotypical which often stems from pathologizing conditions of neurodiversity.

Dearest,

I feel certain that I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don't think two people could have been happier 'til this terrible disease came. I can't fight any longer. I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work. And you will I know. You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read. What I want to say is I owe all the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me and incredibly good. I want to say that — everybody knows it. If anybody could have saved me it would have been you. Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness. I can't go on spoiling your life any longer.

I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been. V.<sup>4</sup>

And, somewhat obviously, there is also the matter of her queerness. In some respects, it is actually a genuine question. On one hand, we know that Woolf was romantically involved with Vita Sackville-West, who was quite an outspoken Sapphist and who, despite being married to a man, was in a position to pursue relationships with women, in part thanks to the fact that her husband was also queer.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Sackville-West can also be seen as a historical polyamorous figure, as Hermione Lee, in her extensive biography of Virginia Woolf, notes: “Vita had fallen in love with Harold Nicolson when she was twenty and he was a charming, clever, lively young diplomat. (At the time, typically, she was also involved with two girlfriends, one of them Violet Keppel, the wild, sexy, sophisticated daughter of Edward VII’s mistress.)”<sup>6</sup> Vita was certainly an important influence on Woolf’s writing, especially when it comes to *Orlando* – the novel that is very loosely based on her life and the history of her family.

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<sup>4</sup> Hermione Lee, 757-757

<sup>5</sup> Hermione Lee, 488

<sup>6</sup> Hermione Lee, 488

For now, however, it should be noted that Woolf's relationship to queerness was not at all a straightforward one. She would often talk about the importance of "friendship" between women, as she does, for example, in *A Room of One's Own*, where she talks about how women's relationships are often misrepresented in literature and offers us an image of two women, Chloe and Olivia, who were friends and who did not merely exist as backgrounds for men in the fiction.<sup>7</sup> Amusingly enough, this image was reinterpreted to suggest sexual or romantic desire in Lillian Faderman's anthology of lesbian and homoerotic literature, *Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*.<sup>8</sup> Woolf's construct of Chloe and Olivia is also quite similar to the "Bechdel Test," that originates from one of Allison Bechdel's strips from the series *Dykes to Watch Out For*, where a film can only pass the "Bechdel Test" by including at least two female characters who have a conversation in which they do not mention men.<sup>9</sup> In terms of Woolf's queerness, it is important to discuss the idea of "friendship" as perhaps not being entirely dissimilar from romantic or sexual desire.

So, what was, then, Woolf's approach to romantic and sexual relationships among women? Of course, we can never know, how she truly felt internally, so we are left to speculate based on the things she said that made it into the historical records. Hermione Lee quotes her diary entry from 21 December 1925, which may give us a pointer: "These Sapphists *love* women; friendship is never untinged with amorosity."<sup>10</sup> So, in this sense, there can be no friendship truly free of romantic desire – the question is the extent of that desire. Lee continues:

Virginia's preference for her own sex had been a fact of her life since childhood. She turned it into a joke (especially with Violet and Vanessa), a joke which allowed her to express her strong feelings of need without embarrassment. With all her close women friends she employed a comically demanding, amorous flirtatiousness. Her letters from other women (Mary Hutchinson, Ottoline Morrell, Katherine Mansfield, Fredegond Shove, Sibyl Colefax) often read like

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<sup>7</sup> Virginia Woolf, "A Room of One's Own," *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Morag Shiach (Oxford: OUP, 2008) 108-109

<sup>8</sup> Lillian Faderman ed., *Chloe Plus Olivia: An Anthology of Lesbian Literature from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (London: Penguin, 1994)

<sup>9</sup> "Bechdel Test," *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 5 Aug. 2017 <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bechdel\\_test](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bechdel_test)> 6 Aug 2017

<sup>10</sup> Hermione Lee, 490

love letters. But though kisses and pettings and intimate conversations are asked for and provided, *she did not define herself as a Sapphist*.<sup>11</sup> (emphasis mine)

In light of this, we need to ask the question of what may be the reasons for her resisting the self-identification as a Sapphist, which was an identity that included both lesbian and bisexual women, especially given that Lee claims that: “she was herself more erotically drawn to women than to men.”<sup>12</sup> For one, she may not have felt like her desire for women was on the same level of someone like Vita and some of the other openly queer women she was familiar with. That she sought friendship, first and foremost, which in some cases could have grown into a romantic and sexual relationship, but unlike them, she did not specifically pursue romance with other women. Another reason may be that, at the time, many queer women strongly adhered to what today we would call the notion of the “butch-femme couple.” Masculine-presenting women (some of which were actually transgender men) were traditionally supposed to pursue relationships with feminine-presenting women<sup>13</sup> – this idea is deeply embedded within *The Well of Loneliness* and will be discussed in more detail in the section devoted to that novel. Vita Sackville-West, however, and some of the other women mentioned above were more feminine-presenting than, say, Radclyffe Hall and as such, Woolf being involved in a more femme-femme (or at least not a clear butch-femme) relationship with Vita may have made her feel more alienated from the core Sapphic community. Hermione Lee suggests another possible explanation, which is simply that Woolf may have perceived the label as too limiting for herself, as she did with many other labels: “She could not bear to categorise herself as belonging to a group defined by its sexual behaviour (just as she didn’t want to think of herself as an ordinary ‘wife’, or as a writer of ‘novels’). She wanted to avoid all categories.”<sup>14</sup>

Things be as they may, one thing is clear – queerness, in some form or another, does certainly have a place in Virginia Woolf’s work, and not just *Mrs Dalloway* and *Orlando*. Admittedly, in her other works, it may be not as plainly visible in the text itself, but even then, there are some compelling textual interpretations of certain

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<sup>11</sup> Hermione Lee, 490

<sup>12</sup> Hermione Lee, 614

<sup>13</sup> Ryn McCoy, “Where Are All the Butches?” *PQ Monthly*, Brilliant Media, LLC., 26 Apr. 2017. <[www.pqmonthly.com/whereareallthebutches/25741](http://www.pqmonthly.com/whereareallthebutches/25741)>

<sup>14</sup> Hermione Lee, 490

characters as queer. The very fact that there is an entire book, *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*, devoted to essays about lesbian readings (the book is from 1997, when the inclusion of bisexual perspectives was still minimal) of Woolf and her individual works of fiction speaks volumes to how much there is to explore on that level. Perhaps it is merely the desire of us queer people to make such a prominent figure of English fiction one of our own – a sort of early-20<sup>th</sup> century mother of queer women’s fiction. But I would like to argue that there is something more than just wishful thinking in that, that queerness is inadvertently a part of her body of fiction – whether it is sometimes more pronounced and visible on the surface and, at other times, requires some digging to find, pull out and polish those hidden clusters of queerness.

## 2.2. Mrs Dalloway

*Mrs Dalloway* is, without doubt, one of Virginia Woolf’s most enduring works, potentially challenged only by *To the Lighthouse* on the fictional side of things and *A Room of One’s Own* on the non-fictional side. It is a novel that emphasises character and technique perhaps above anything else. The novel’s plot, if there is any plot to speak of, is the internal struggle of the individual focalised characters rather than “plot” in the more conventional sense – the sum of things and events that happen to the protagonist(s) or directly affect them. In fact, it may be said that, for some characters, such as Clarissa, the plot has already occurred – the emphasis is on what is left and how the character handles it.

To speak of interpreting *Mrs Dalloway* is to speak not necessarily of interpreting the novel as a whole, but rather, due to its use of multiple, parallel focalisations, to instead speak of interpreting the novel’s individual characters and what their inner workings reveal about their history, their personality and their regrets. This is perhaps where I get to the point I am trying to make: On these pages, I do not wish to analyse *Mrs Dalloway* in its entirety, as a coherent and unified text and apply some sort of queer reading that could be applied onto the entire novel. Instead, what I wish to do is to acknowledge the novel’s largely disjointed nature and work within the confines of individual characters – most notably Clarissa Dalloway. Just as *Mrs Dalloway* builds a believable world from the ground up, through giving us access to the minutiae of everyday life of several

different characters, so do I wish to rather focus on the little things rather than some grand scheme that permeates the entire novel.

Let us, then, start with the titular character, Clarissa Dalloway. The novel, with its inclusion of several other perspectives, problematises the notion of Clarissa as a “main character.” She is, certainly, the titular character and the character who supports the novel’s structure, since her perspective gets the most focus and she both opens and closes the novel. But my choosing of her as the primary character for discussing queerness in *Mrs Dalloway* is not because I necessarily perceive her as the most important part of the novel – it is simply that I believe she is the most relevant choice for the discussion of this theme.

So, beginning with a bit of gender-focused analysis, we should perhaps first look at the title of the novel itself – *Mrs Dalloway*. This is a problematic reduction, particularly when speaking about a female character. The title of the novel is not *Clarissa Dalloway*, her first name is elided in favour of a generic honorific for a married woman. Given the tradition of women accepting their husband’s last name, which stems from the idea that the “ownership” of the woman is transferred, at the point of marriage, from the father (whose last name she would have carried until that point) to the husband, identifying Clarissa in the title only as Mrs Dalloway, the wife of some Mr Dalloway, is a little troubling.

But in some ways, Woolf’s decision may not be as unfortunate as it may seem. For one, to a new reader who has not opened the book yet, Clarissa Dalloway is someone they are unfamiliar with, and only through opening the book and becoming acquainted with her by being granted access to her inner thoughts can we recognise her as Clarissa, as someone who is no longer a mere stranger to us. Another way to look at this choice would be not from the outside, from the position of the reader or a fictional character inhabiting the world and not knowing Clarissa well, but instead from the inside – from Clarissa’s own perspective. If we bring back the notion of “Mrs Dalloway” as “wife to Mr Dalloway,” we essentially get to the heart of Clarissa’s internal dilemma – many of her thoughts are devoted to considering why she made the choice to marry Richard Dalloway instead of potentially marrying Peter Walsh or even pursuing a romantic relationship with Sally Seton. In some ways, the notion of being “Mrs Dalloway” seems to be what troubles Clarissa the most and given her privileged position within the novel

(compared to the rest of the characters), naming the novel *Mrs Dalloway* may simply be a very clever way of hinting at the novel's biggest conflict.

Considering that marriage seems to be what weighs on Clarissa's mind the most, the question of gender and gender politics is unavoidable. Clarissa does not seem to know what kind of marriage she would actually prefer. It is fairly clear that her marriage with Richard is imperfect and that, for her at least, it has lost a good deal of its appeal, but it is not so simple: "For in marriage a little licence, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house; which Richard gave her, and she him."<sup>15</sup> To an extent, the freedom Richard's apparent lack of interest gives her is, in some ways, important for her to have. She seems to imply that being with a partner who would be overly possessive and refused to give her a degree of independence would be stifling and unacceptable to her.

She does not say that she would not be happy with a man – and her oscillation between considering Peter and Sally seems to prove that she is interested in men and women alike – which is why I find Eileen Barrett's view that "[t]he novel's scathing depictions of heterosexuality in marriage demonstrate Woolf's lesbian-feminist critique of this institution"<sup>16</sup> rather troubling. The novel does not seem to criticise the idea of marriage as a whole, but Clarissa simply expresses that the sort of marriage she desires is a looser one. If anything, this reflects Virginia's marriage with Leonard, in which Virginia had enough freedom to date Vita on the side, apparently with Leonard's approval.<sup>17</sup> The idea that the critique of marriage in *Mrs Dalloway* was somehow "lesbian-feminist" is a completely absurd notion, especially considering that a) Woolf was not a lesbian and b) lesbian feminism, as a tangible ideology within the greater ideology of feminism, did not really exist in the 1920s. (That is not to say that there were no feminists who identified as Sapphists, but rather that they did not establish and promote a comprehensive lesbian-feminist politics, which happened only later in the 1960s and 70s. Woolf certainly would have never called herself a "lesbian feminist.")

Nevertheless, queerness (and not lesbianism, as Barret would suggests) is certainly at play in *Mrs Dalloway* and it is not merely playing the second fiddle. As has been

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<sup>15</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: OUP, 2009) 6-7

<sup>16</sup> Eileen Barrett, "Unmasking Lesbian Passion: The Inverted World of *Mrs Dalloway*," *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*, ed. Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer (New York: New York University Press, 1997) 147

<sup>17</sup> Hermione Lee, 498

mentioned above, Clarissa, more so than any other character in the book, clearly harbours (or harboured, at the very least) romantic feelings towards the person of the same gender – Sally Seton. Let us look at some passages that clearly point towards Clarissa being queer and some of the passages that are specifically concerned with Sally as she is seen from Clarissa’s self-reflective point of view:

[...] yet she could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman, not a girl, of a woman confessing, as to her they often did, some scrape, some folly. And whether it was pity, or their beauty, or that she was older, or some accident – like a faint scent, or a violin next door (so strange is the power of sound at certain moments), she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt. Only for a moment; but it was enough.<sup>18</sup>

Note that this does not necessarily seem to be a specific memory, as is the case with her feelings for Sally Seton, but rather a generalised reflection that shows a certain pattern in Clarissa’s life. There is some notable uncertainty on Clarissa’s part as to why she is sometimes overcome with (presumably) romantic feelings for other women. I would suggest that that is simply because of the fact that she feels drawn to them by the often-irrational feeling of romantic or sexual desire. She may search for some way of rationalising these feelings, to gain some degree of control over them – pity, beauty, age, fitting music – but as is the case for many people, desire and attraction cannot be explained using purely rational means. She also avoids describing her feelings openly and in detail by choosing to couch them within a deeply heteronormative context – feeling what men often feel towards women. Lesbian desire here is then rooted within a heteronormative system of “man and woman” and is not independent from it. Her feelings are not presented as feelings that queer women sometimes feel towards each other, but that men feel towards women.

But Clarissa does not leave it at that, she wants to better understand her feelings, so Sally comes up as an example: “But this question of love (she thought, putting her coat away), this falling in love with women. Take Sally Seton, her relation in the old days with Sally Seton. Had not that, after all, been love?”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Mrs Dalloway*, 27

<sup>19</sup> *Mrs Dalloway*, 28

It is perhaps here that the barriers of Clarissa's internalised heteronormativity start crumbling. She no longer describes her feelings as "what men feel towards women," but gives them root within her own experience – of her love for Sally Seton. She also elaborates on her feelings and gains a deeper understand of them. On the previous page, she describes her romantic desire for women as something transient, that comes and goes very quickly, leaving only some minor confusion in its wake. But this "falling in love with women" is something else, something deeper than she describes on the previous page. Thinking more closely about her history with Sally Seton seems to awaken something in her – the realisation that her desire for women is a genuine one, on par with her desire for men, not just an "accident." Were her feelings for and memories of other women suppressed over the time she spent with Richard and are now rushing back?

Sally herself, as she is described by Clarissa, actually seems to strongly resemble a certain contemporary trope of queer women's literature – the free-spirit lover, separated from her family, who will show the girl who is just starting to recognise her budding feelings for other women the true meaning of love. Clarissa appears to be enamoured with Sally, who dreams of transforming the world:

There they sat, hour after hour, talking in her bedroom at the top of the house, talking about life, how they were to reform the world. They meant to found a society to abolish private property, and actually had a letter written, though not sent out. The ideas were Sally's, of course – but very soon she was just as excited [...] <sup>20</sup>

An example of a lesbian story that uses a very similar trope in terms of characterisation of the love interest is Julie Maroh's graphic novel *Blue Is the Warmest Colour* (*Le bleu est une couleur chaude*), which was adapted into a film in 2013. In the graphic novel, the protagonist, Clémentine, is presented as a somewhat awkward teenager who, after a brief sexual encounter with a man which she did not really enjoy, meets Emma after her friend Valentin, who is already openly gay drags her to a gay bar. The rest of the novel focuses on the relationship between Clémentine and Emma, who is older and openly gay. Sally is sort of a tropological parallel to Emma. Emma, through her free-wheeling, experienced-lesbian-artist attitude, allows Clémentine to open up about her feelings and

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<sup>20</sup> *Mrs Dalloway*, 28-29

learn to enjoy life – similarly, Clarissa seems much more relaxed and, dare I say, girlish and joyous when she talks about her time with Sally.

The word “girlish” is perhaps doubly relevant here, as we do not know how old Clarissa was when she first fell in love with Sally. Given the context that Clarissa talks about, it is perhaps fair to assume that she was maybe in her mid-teens, somewhere around fifteen or sixteen (this is mostly speculation, but some sort of timeline might be useful here). In this sense, the fact that Clarissa is fairly young when she falls in love with Sally may have been, to some extent, a way to talk about lesbian desire without risking having the novel be censored or even banned (as happened to *The Well of Loneliness* for being too explicit). The 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century may have been very much averse to any form of same-gender love, but with some relevant exceptions – such as love between two young women, though only as long as that love was not overtly romantic and remained desexualised, with the idea being that the women would eventually grow up to be “good” heteronormative wives with no more interest in women.<sup>21</sup> In fact, this idea is still very much alive in the contemporary genre of *yuri* – Japanese manga and anime centred on women in love with each other. These stories are often set in gender-segregated high schools (*Maria-sama ga Miteru*, *Strawberry Panic!*) and generally have very few, if any, prominent male characters. The love between the characters would often be presented as “young love” (the women have not yet come to terms with being attracted to men) or as “love out of necessity” (since in a gender-segregated environment, there would be no men to date). It is heavily implied that once the women involved in these stories grow up, they would eventually move on and get married to men. Suffice to note that this trope is extremely problematic in the sense that it is deeply couched within heterosexist ideas about queerness, depicting the presence of lesbian desire as merely a common “phase” in women’s lives that will eventually go away. The description of Clarissa’s relationship with Sally follows a similar pattern, although this may have been purely incidental or an intentional technique to prevent the novel’s censorship.

Yet there is perhaps also an autobiographical element at play here. As I have noted previously, the biography of Woolf confirms that she harboured romantic (and likely even sexual) feelings towards other women and as Eileen Barrett notes: “Numerous

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<sup>21</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: The Women’s Press, 1997) 148-149

critics notice that Woolf modeled the relationship between Clarissa and Sally Seton upon her own love for Madge Symonds Vaughan, the oldest daughter of John Addington Symonds.”<sup>22</sup> She goes on to quote from Quentin Bell’s (who was Woolf’s nephew) biography of Woolf:

Virginia was in fact in love with her. She was the first woman – and in those early years Virginia fled altogether from anything male – the first to capture her heart, to make it beat faster, indeed to make it almost stand still as, her hand gripping that handle of the water-jug in the top room at Hyde Park Gate, she exclaimed to herself: “Madge is here; at this moment she is actually under this roof.” Virginia once declared that she had never felt more poignant emotion for anyone than she did at that moment for Madge.<sup>23</sup>

As I have said previously, my goal is not to make the claim that Clarissa Dalloway is somehow an autobiographical representation of Woolf herself, but that, rather, the choice to make Clarissa a fairly explicitly queer character was very likely affected by Woolf’s own life experience. Whether Madge Symonds Vaughan is or is not the basis for Sally Seton is, from my perspective, largely irrelevant. What is relevant, however, is that we can trace some of Clarissa’s feelings towards Sally within Woolf herself.

Interestingly enough, the aforementioned trope also appears elsewhere in *Mrs Dalloway*, when Richard (and Clarissa potentially too) interprets the relationship between Elizabeth and Miss Kilman: “But it might be only a phase, as Richard said, such as all girls go through. It might be falling in love.”<sup>24</sup> I think that there are more things at play here in terms of this description. When the focalisation eventually shifts over the perspective of Doris Kilman, it becomes rather clear that what is happening between her and Elizabeth and Kilman is far more complex than Elizabeth simply falling for Kilman in any sort of a romantic sense or vice versa.

First of all, there seems to be a certain degree of projection on Clarissa’s part, recalling her own experiences of feeling love towards women and applying them onto her own daughter: “Degrading passion! she thought, thinking of Kilman and her Elizabeth

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<sup>22</sup> Eileen Barrett, “Unmasking Lesbian Passion: The Inverted World of *Mrs Dalloway*,” *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*, ed. Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer (New York: New York University Press, 1997) 151

<sup>23</sup> Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt, 1997) 60-61

<sup>24</sup> *Mrs Dalloway*, 10

walking to the Army and Navy Stores.”<sup>25</sup> Yet, there actually seems to be very little, if any, passion towards Kilman coming from Elizabeth. The same, of course, cannot be said about the opposite direction.

Doris Kilman seems to desire Elizabeth Dalloway in some regard, but to think about her desire as a specifically romantic one would, almost certainly, be an oversimplification of the various things that are going on with Kilman’s character and actions. First and foremost, while Clarissa’s inner struggle is primarily over the decision to marry Richard over pursuing a deeper relationship with Sally or marrying Peter Walsh, Kilman’s primary concern seems to be with class and the sense of inferiority that stems both from her economic position within society, but also from the lack of physical beauty, which, as she says “[...] for a woman, of course, that meant never meeting the opposite sex. Never would she come first with anyone.”<sup>26</sup> Unlike Clarissa Dalloway, who seems fairly reserved and calm, Doris Kilman is a person who is seething with rage inside, consumed by the daily injustices that society hurls at her. Elizabeth is certainly an object of desire, but of a certain possessive desire, the desire to have power over something or someone: “Miss Kilman could not let her go! this youth that was so beautiful! this girl, whom she genuinely loved! Her large hand opened and shut on the table.”<sup>27</sup> It is notable, that this opening and closing of the hand potentially acts in parallel with Peter Walsh’s playing with his knife – Peter Walsh himself being a possessive, misogynistic character and the playing with the knife being a symbol that could easily be interpreted as a phallic one.

She was about to split asunder, she felt. The agony was so terrific. If she could grasp her, if she could clasp her, if she could make her hers absolutely and for ever and then die; that was all she wanted. But to sit here, unable to think of anything to say; to see Elizabeth turning against her; to be felt repulsive even by her – it was too much; she could not stand it. The thick fingers curled inwards.<sup>28</sup>

Her desire for Elizabeth seems much more rooted in a desire for control over another person who is, class-wise, above her and who has the qualities Kilman herself feels she lacks, such as beauty. Elizabeth is, then, not an object of romantic or sexual desire, she

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<sup>25</sup> *Mrs Dalloway*, 108

<sup>26</sup> *Mrs Dalloway*, 109

<sup>27</sup> *Mrs Dalloway*, 111

<sup>28</sup> *Mrs Dalloway*, 112

is just an object, full stop. Written in 1924, *Mrs Dalloway* may still contain some reverberations of the Russian Revolution and the anti-working-class fears that, at the time, overcame the upper classes in other parts of the world that such a revolution could happen even in their country. In this sense, she could be interpreted as a metaphorical leftist revolutionary whose revolutionary action is rooted in seeking to control the upper classes and their capital, be it economic or social.

Some lesbian critics have noted that Kilman may also be some sort of Clarissa's lesbian alter-ego, in the sense that while Clarissa "den[ies] her love for women to marry respectably,"<sup>29</sup> Kilman chooses to live her life true to herself – as a feminist lesbian. This sort of approach appears to me to be largely based on false and deeply exclusionary second-wave lesbian-feminist notions about queer identities and their multiplicity. It is an approach that completely disregards the clear, textual confirmations of Clarissa's attraction to men and women alike in favour of a reading that imposes a lesbian identity onto any female character who shows any sort of a romantic interest in women, thus excluding bisexual and other polysexual readings, which would be more in adherence with the textual evidence. Doris Kilman cannot be the genuine-lesbian alter-ego of Clarissa Dalloway when Clarissa herself is, demonstrably, not a lesbian.

There are also two central male characters in *Mrs Dalloway* that warrant some sort of analysis in terms of gender – Peter Walsh and Septimus Warren Smith.

While my primary concern is over Sapphism and gender, it is relevant to mention Septimus, given that he is a character that has, at times, been interpreted as queer, if not outright gay, by some critics and thus acting as some sort of a male parallel for Clarissa and vice versa. Personally, I think that this interpretation hinges entirely on whether or not we are willing to consider Septimus to be paralysed solely by the traumatic experiences he had in the Great War, which resulted in him suffering from "shell shock," as it was known back then, or PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) as it is known now, or whether some of his trauma may also stem from the fact that he is queer and feels isolated in a heteronormative and deeply heterosexist society. Both interpretations may be equally valid in this case, as there is enough textual evidence to support them. We know that Virginia Woolf was friends with some queer men (such as

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<sup>29</sup> Emily Jensen, "Clarissa Dalloway's Respectable Suicide" *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*, ed. Jane Marcus (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983) 174

E. M. Forster) and as a queer woman herself, it is likely that she was, at least to some degree, aware of the trials and tribulations queer men had to face. Septimus' experience with psychologists is particularly perceptive, if we are to consider the notion that Septimus is queer, since at the time, finding a psychologist in England who would be willing to help queer people to accept themselves rather than "correct" them into being straight would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible – they would have likely followed the ideas of Richard von Krafft-Ebing or Havelock Ellis, both of which had very negative ideas about homosexuality. (At that time, however, there was Magnus Hirshfeld, a Berlin-based sexologist who was determined to do his best to help queer people, including transgender women, to learn to simply accept who they were and who was a staunch advocate for queer rights. After the Nazis came to power in 1933, the institute at which he worked was taken over and his research publicly burned.) This very negative presentation of psychologists of the time may have also been based on Woolf's own negative experiences with them, especially given that one of the therapists, Sir William, recommends "rest, rest, rest; a long rest in bed"<sup>30</sup> which is the core idea of the "rest-cure" – a very common treatment prescribed to women with any and all psychological issues. (Note: The "rest-cure" and the horrible experiences associated with it also provided the basis for Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper.") Septimus' apparent apathy towards his own wife provides additional support for the idea that he is a gay character (rather than being bisexual like Clarissa), although that can also be explained by the dissociation resulting from his trauma – the text is perhaps intentionally ambiguous in that regard.

Then there is also Peter Walsh, the man whose return to London is responsible for Clarissa's soul-searching and questioning of her decisions. Peter Walsh is an extremely interesting character in terms of his gender presentation, as he essentially appears to be the embodiment of what is described today as "toxic masculinity." He is a man who feels entitled to the women he desires and seems to have a similar sense of possessiveness towards some women as Kilman has towards Elizabeth. From Clarissa's perspective, he is presented to us as a sort of romantic hero archetype – a man who is introverted to the point of almost being shy, but who has a certain aura of pensiveness and mystery around him that Clarissa finds deeply attractive. This image is entirely shattered, however, once the focalisation moves over to Walsh and we are allowed some

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<sup>30</sup> *Mrs Dalloway*, 82

insight into how he sees himself and the rest of the world. First, there is that pocket-knife tick that he has, which, as I have noted above, is a clearly phallic symbol, but, more importantly, it is a phallic symbol that, given that the knife is weapon, has a certain quality to it that suggests the threat of sexual violence. Walsh's attitude towards women in general is deeply misogynistic and troubling: "Everyone if they were honest would say the same; one doesn't want people after fifty; one doesn't want to go on telling women they are pretty; that's what most men of fifty would say, Peter Walsh thought, if they were honest."<sup>31</sup> Note the fact that this is already presented as an assumption of Walsh's, not some sort of a general truth. He is projecting his misogynistic attitude towards women onto other men, automatically assuming that because he does not find women over fifty attractive, other men must be lying if they say they do. In a lot of ways, his attitudes are similar to contemporary "men's rights activists" (MRAs), who, despite their name, mainly focus on peddling misogyny, violence and pseudo-science about gender relations.<sup>32</sup>

We should also consider the fact that Peter Walsh appears in the story after he arrives to England after many years spent in India – he was a direct agent of colonialism. He, therefore, returns back to England with a literal coloniser mindset. This would explain some of his possessive feelings towards women and his general inclination towards warping the world around his own ideas about it (as seen in the quotation above) – this egocentric view of the world stands directly in opposition of Woolf's literary technique, which emphasises that the world can only be understood through understanding a multiplicity of viewpoints. In a way, Peter Walsh is the novel's villain. A literal stalker, he follows women around London as a way to have "fun."<sup>33</sup> Freudian psychoanalysis appears to be present in the novel in some capacity, especially in the context of Septimus and Peter, but it never truly plays a significant role – Woolf seems to intentionally leave their backgrounds ambiguous instead of trying to explicitly diagnose the characters using Freudian models. As Michael H. Whitworth states:

Woolf knew of Freud's works – the Hogarth Press was publishing them – and would certainly have been aware of his ideas at least in outline, and possibly of the controversy over war neuroses. In a draft version of the novel, even Hugh

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<sup>31</sup> *Mrs Dalloway*, 68

<sup>32</sup> Peter C. Baker, "Hunting the Manosphere," *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 13 June 2017 <[www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/magazine/hunting-the-manosphere.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/magazine/hunting-the-manosphere.html)>

<sup>33</sup> *Mrs Dalloway*, 45-46

Whitbread is up-to-date enough to have “heard of” Freud. Unlike her contemporary Rose Macaulay, whose 1921 novel *Dangerous Ages* is speckled with his terminology, Woolf does not allow Freud to obtrude.<sup>34</sup>

*Mrs Dalloway* is a novel where sexuality and gender do not seem to play a large role on the surface level, but once it is picked apart even a little bit, it becomes rather clear that, as in real life, those two aspects permeate the novel in a way that makes them unavoidable and inseparable from it.

### 2.3. *Orlando: A Biography*

There is a particular quote that often comes to my mind whenever I engage in feminist or queer analysis that in any way has to do with gender and the way it is perceived and constructed: “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman.”<sup>35</sup> This quote from Simone de Beauvoir’s seminal work of existentialist feminism *The Second Sex* (published in 1949) is firmly rooted in existentialist philosophy, rather than in-depth analysis of gender as a social construct, but it is still very much applicable to the latter – doubly so, in fact, when it comes to *Orlando*, as I will discuss below. The reason why I have decided to bring it up now, however, is because I want to focus on the fact that, despite Woolf’s use of the word “sex” to describe both Orlando’s physical attributes and gender<sup>36</sup>, she seems to be acutely aware of the difference between the two and, to an extent, the fact that they are not “naturally” connected.

To me *Orlando*, despite being generally presented as an intentionally silly novel based on the same premise that we see time and time again to this day in the context of comedy – a man is turned into a woman, confusion and hilarity ensue – engages with the concepts of sex, gender and sexuality with keen insight not only into the human psyche, but also into the massive influence various human societies have when it comes to constructing these concepts. The novel remains relevant even though our wider cultural attitudes towards gender and sex have largely shifted away from where they were at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is especially relevant to queer and feminist

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<sup>34</sup> Michael H. Whitworth, *Virginia Woolf: Authors in Context* (Oxford: OUP, 2009) 174

<sup>35</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2010) 283

<sup>36</sup> The time “gender” was used in this meaning in English is listed by the Oxford English Dictionary as 1945. “gender, n.” Def. 3b. *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2017. Web, 3 July 2017

readers, because it asks questions that we continue to ask ourselves today, as Christy L. Burns puts it:

The questioning of identity in *Orlando* raises issues that of returning importance to feminism. How much of the self, Woolf asks, is unchangeably and essentially our own? How solid a space does one have for resistance to social demands for conformity? Does the "spirit of an age" weigh upon the sexes differently? And how does one's adaptation or resistance to society affect one's writing?<sup>37</sup>

To avoid confusion, I will refer to *Orlando* using the gender-neutral singular "they" regardless of *Orlando*'s current sex and gender identity within the narrative. *Orlando* is overflowing with sentences and paragraphs to analyse and almost every page has something that is relevant to the analysis of gender, sex and sexuality. Because of this, I am forced to limit myself only to the sections I find the most interesting and important. Just as sex is in question in *Mrs Dalloway* (with the unknown figure sitting inside a car), it is continually questioned here, beginning with the very first sentence of the novel: "He – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it – was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor..."<sup>38</sup>

Woolf intentionally opens the novel like this to prepare the readers for what is to come and does so, as she does repeatedly throughout *Orlando*, with a slight comedic spin. On one hand, this ancestor of *Orlando* is clothed in a way that is not obviously gendered, but somehow there is no doubt of his sex. How is it so? Why is there no doubt when his attire does not clearly signify his gender? The answer here may be Woolf pointing out that gender is not only constructed through gendered fashion, but also through gendered action – in this case, combat, which is traditionally considered to be one of the most masculine things a person can engage in. The joke here is perhaps that, even though visually he may appear androgynous (at least based on his clothing), he must be a man, because only a man would be performing this action.

The same idea of not being able to visually distinguish women and men with ease reappears, once again used to some extent as a comedic twist, when *Orlando* first catches sight of an unknown person (Princess Natasha), who is skating outside and

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<sup>37</sup> Christine L. Burns "Re-Dressing Feminist Identities: Tensions between Essential and Constructed Selves in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 40.3 (1994): 346, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/441560>> 3 May 2017

<sup>38</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*, ed. Rachel Bowlby (Oxford: OUP, 2008) 13

whose “loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex.”<sup>39</sup> What follows is a passage that describes Orlando’s fascination with and attraction to this figure of an uncertain gender. Orlando is so worried about potential of feeling so attracted to somebody who may not be a woman, and who may thus likely not return Orlando’s affection, that Orlando was “ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex and thus all embraces were out of the question.”<sup>40</sup> Orlando is not worried about being attracted to a man, it seems, but about being let down by him. Orlando also attempts to assign this skater a gender based solely on action and appearance, a compulsion many cis (and some trans) people have that Julia Serano describes as the “cissexual<sup>41</sup> assumption”<sup>42</sup> – “a boy it must be – no woman could skate with such speed and vigour...”<sup>43</sup> – and fails to do so accurately. It should be noted that what reveals the skater to be a woman is once again gendered action (curtseying before the King) rather than just appearance, as Princess Natasha is described as somewhat androgynous:

Legs, hands, carriage, were a boy’s, but no boy ever had a mouth like that; no boy had those breasts; no boy had eyes which looked as if they had been fished from the bottom of the sea. Finally, coming to a stop and sweeping a curtsey with the utmost grace to the King, who was shuffling past on the arm of some Lord-in-waiting, the unknown skater came to a standstill. She was not a handsbreadth off. She was a woman.<sup>44</sup>

This theme of a person’s sex being somewhat obscured by local or contemporary style of clothing reappears several times throughout the novel, but nowhere else is it as important as when Archduke Harry reveals to have been cross-dressing and presenting himself as Archduchess Harriet in order to establish a romantic relationship with Orlando.<sup>45</sup> There are several observations to be made in regards to this, but I want to focus primarily on one of them, so I will get the other ones out of the way first.

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<sup>39</sup> *Orlando*, 36

<sup>40</sup> *Orlando*, 36

<sup>41</sup> Note: Serano uses the now outdated terms “cissexual” and “transsexual” instead of “cisgender” and “transgender” which are nowadays preferred by most trans people. This is partly because of her personal preference and partly because the terms were not changed from the book’s first edition, which came out in 2008.

<sup>42</sup> Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2016) 164-165

<sup>43</sup> *Orlando*, 36

<sup>44</sup> *Orlando*, 37

<sup>45</sup> *Orlando*, 171

Archduke Harry is a queer man who, due to the society's attitude towards queer men, was forced to cross-dress in order to protect himself while interacting with Orlando. The revelation of the Archduke's cross-dressing is intended as a faux-parallel to Orlando's transformation – with the main difference being that, unlike Orlando, the Archduke seems to retain an attachment to traditional masculinity, despite his experiences of cross-dressing as a woman, which seems to make him boring and undesirable to Orlando. Now for the part that I find deeply troubling about this – the fact that the Archduke was trying to “deceive”<sup>46</sup> Orlando by presenting as a woman and that the ways he tried to show his supposed affection towards Orlando could easily be described as predatory. I take umbrage with this not because I do not think that that is true within the narrative, but that it is based on extremely negative stereotypes of both crossdressers and transgender people, especially trans women. The trope of transgender people (again, especially women) being sexual predators who only present as a certain gender in order to deceive men and women into having sex with them is a very old and enduring one<sup>47</sup> – and to this day, trans people in the United Kingdom can go to prison for not disclosing their trans status before having sex with someone, as not disclosing one's trans status may be considered “rape by fraud” under UK law.<sup>48</sup> Given how common this trope was even in Woolf's time, it is difficult not to believe that Archduke Harry exists outside of it – and even if it did back then, it certainly no longer does today. This is a stereotype so pervasive and so dangerous that trans people get murdered over it when they are revealed to be trans.<sup>49</sup> Even *Orlando*, then, which does otherwise great job of exploring gender without ridiculing its own main character, is not impervious to repeating extremely dangerous transphobic tropes.

I would now like to move on to the part of the book that I consider the most interesting and compelling for analysis – the transformation that occurs roughly halfway through the novel and the things that follow directly from it.

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<sup>46</sup> *Orlando*, 170

<sup>47</sup> *Whipping Girl*, 36

<sup>48</sup> Alexandra Sims, “Trans People Could 'Face Rape Charges' If They Don't Declare Sexual History, Warns Trans Activist,” *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 11 June 2016 <[www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/trans-people-could-face-rape-charges-if-they-don-t-declare-sexual-history-warns-trans-activist-a7076546.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/trans-people-could-face-rape-charges-if-they-don-t-declare-sexual-history-warns-trans-activist-a7076546.html)> 1 Aug 2017

<sup>49</sup> Carolyn Marshall, “Two Guilty of Murder in Death of a Transgender Teenager,” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 13 Sept. 2005, <[www.nytimes.com/2005/09/13/us/two-guilty-of-murder-in-death-of-a-transgender-teenager.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/13/us/two-guilty-of-murder-in-death-of-a-transgender-teenager.html)> 1 Aug 2017

Perhaps the first questions to ask in relation to Orlando's transformation would be "Why?" From my point of view, that question has, as appears to be the case for most things in *Orlando*, two primary answers – because it opens up further avenues for comedy and because it allows Woolf to critically explore the question of gender from two different angles. Even before and during Woolf's time there were reports about the lives of transgender people – often appearing in the form of sensationalist and scandalous articles – but these almost exclusively focused on dehumanising and ridiculing the transgender people they were about, rather than questioning contemporary gender restrictions and norms.<sup>50</sup> While Orlando certainly is not a transgender character, there is a possibility that such accounts of real-life transgender people may have been a potential source of inspiration for Woolf to try and observe gender from "both sides" (although, in reality, there are more than two sides to this).

The decision to start off with Orlando as a man and changing them into a woman (at least, initially, on the anatomical level) was, among many other factors, almost certainly informed by Woolf's desire to show the loss of male privilege Orlando previously benefitted from as well as to observe the social, rather than biological, origin of gender. The anatomical change that Orlando goes through is generally very downplayed. In *Orlando*, while sex matters in terms of the way the outside world interacts with Orlando, an internal sense of gender is given central stage. Perhaps the most telling of this is the scene of Orlando's waking up after the transformation:

Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered *their* future, did nothing whatever to alter *their* identity.<sup>51</sup> (emphasis mine)

The use of "their" here appears in the original text and seems to both signify the current uncertainty of Orlando's gender (although the narrator promptly switches to she/her pronouns) and to linguistically refer to the dual state of Orlando as at one point a man and at another point a woman. In fact, on the same page, the narrator specifically says that the change to she/her pronouns happens simply "for convention's sake".<sup>52</sup> Karen

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<sup>50</sup> Perhaps the most famous of such articles is "The Female Husband" in which Henry Fielding presents the story (although partly fictionalised) of Charles Hamilton, an 18<sup>th</sup> century transgender man.

<<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/f/fielding/henry/female-husband/>>

<sup>51</sup> *Orlando*, 133

<sup>52</sup> *Orlando*, 133

Kaivola provides additional insight into this linguistic anomaly, an anomaly that is doubly significant because the singular “they” is nowadays the most widely used gender-neutral pronoun among non-binary people.<sup>53</sup>

Both the pronoun slippage in this passage from the singular “he” to the plural “their” and the use of the masculine pronoun to describe a biological woman call the singularity of Orlando's identity into question, implying that human subjectivity is not reducible to a noncontradictory whole or consistently expressive of the sexed body.<sup>54</sup>

Orlando is entirely unfazed by the changes that had just occurred: “Orlando looked himself up and down in the long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath.”<sup>55</sup> The fact that there is, on Orlando’s side, absolutely no reaction, while important in terms of how the novel presents sex and gender, is also, in some ways, more comedic, as it goes completely against the reader’s expectations (especially for contemporary readers who are used to characters massively overreacting when they are transformed in sex-swapping narratives).

It is also amusing that the narrator, in a situation where Orlando’s transformation occurs through literal magic, takes the time to address the critics within the narrative world who labelled Orlando’s transformation as being “against nature”:

Many people, taking [Orlando’s lack of a reaction] into account, and holding that such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pain to prove (1) that Orlando had always been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man. Let biologists and psychologists determine.<sup>56</sup>

While this could be another reference to how people reaction to stories about transgender people back in Woolf’s time – a possibility that would be difficult to prove – I would again like to point out that even here the factor of anatomy is being presented as not sufficient enough on its own to determine a person’s sex (again, sex and gender are not linguistically distinguished here) and the effort to do so would also require the

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<sup>53</sup> Lauren Easton, “Making a Case for a Singular ‘They’,” *AP Definitive Source*, 24 Mar 2017 <<https://blog.ap.org/products-and-services/making-a-case-for-a-singular-they>> 8 Aug 2017

<sup>54</sup> Karen Kaivola, “Revisiting Woolf’s Representations of Androgyny: Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Nation,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 18.2 (1999) 235, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/464448>> 3 May 2017

<sup>55</sup> *Orlando*, 133

<sup>56</sup> *Orlando*, 133-134

assistance of a psychologist. In that sense, you cannot prove that someone is a woman simply by observing certain anatomical features – the individual’s gender identity needs to be considered as well. Following Simone de Beauvoir’s statement, Orlando cannot be described as a woman, at least not in terms of both sex and gender identity combined.

Let us pause for a moment now and consider the narrative figure of the narrator in *Orlando*. The novel’s narration operates with the idea that the narrator is on one hand a sort of historian who is piecing together this “biography” of Orlando, thus they are working with a limited and not wholly reliable set of information, but who also appears to be semi-omniscient in sections of the novel where such omniscience can be used for comedic effect, allowing the narrator to correct or entirely debunk inaccurate historical accounts of Orlando. Like Orlando’s gender, the extent of the narrator’s knowledge is difficult to define. More importantly, the narrator’s sex and gender are left ambiguous, despite the narrator’s fairly significant presence throughout the novel. Susan Dick writes: “The narrator even claims to have no gender, for biographers, like historians, enjoy immunity from ‘any sex whatever’.”<sup>57</sup> The narrator’s gender is ambiguous, because in their present role as the biographer it, ideally, should not be of any relevance whatsoever. A similar, although far more elaborate, technique of never revealing the narrator’s gender (even though they are also the novel’s main character) is used in Jeanette Winterson’s novel *Written on the Body*, where the ambiguity surrounding the narrator’s gender is used to show the gender-universal experience of love.

What follows is what I find to be perhaps the most remarkable part of the novel, at least as far as gender is concerned. While the narrator has established that the post-transformation Orlando is, internally, an unchanged person, that does not remain true for the rest of the novel – Orlando’s body, and therefore their sex, has already changed, but now comes the time for the change in gender. During Orlando’s stay with the “gypsies” (and I refuse to repeat that slur any further), the shift in Orlando’s gender identity is minimised and delayed. Orlando knows they do not fit in among them, but the reasons for that are varied and cannot be simplified to just the fact that Orlando is outwardly a woman who oftentimes performs actions that are commonly associated with men. In fact, that entire aspect is, for this section of the book, mitigated by the way the narrator presents the society in which Orlando finds themselves – it is a society where

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<sup>57</sup> Susan Dick, “Literary Realism in *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* and *The Waves*,” *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: CUP, 2006) 64

gender distinctions, while present, are not enforced as strongly as they would be among the English, which gives the narrator a short opportunity to explore gender, and the lack of distinction between it, more specifically, in a very different kind of space. England, however, is where the narrative moves next, making the transformation Orlando went through suddenly much more relevant and impactful: “It is a strange fact, but a true one, that up to this moment she had scarcely given her sex a thought,”<sup>58</sup> Orlando realises aboard the ship headed for England. Orlando does not choose to start thinking about their sex – it is the obsession of the English society with it that causes this awareness.

Even before Orlando reaches England, the mere contact with Englishmen and their internalised sexist ideas about how women should behave and act appear to be enough to set off a slow change within Orlando. Orlando now becomes keenly aware of all the ways they differ from other Englishwomen and is torn between the desire to retain a certain degree of freedom and to conform to society’s expectations:

These skirts are plaguey things to have about one’s heels. Yet the stuff (flowered paduasoy) is the loveliest in the world. Never have I seen my own skin (here she laid her hand on her knee) look to such advantage as now. Could I, however, leap overboard and swim in clothes like these? No! Therefore, I should have to trust to the protection of a blue-jacket. Do I object to that? Now do I?<sup>59</sup>

More so than anything, Orlando’s situation on the ship is a bittersweet one. On one hand, Orlando finds femininity comforting and preferable, in some ways, to masculinity, but on the other, in the culture they find themselves in, the commitment to femininity is not a choice that can be made fulfilled only partially. Orlando wants and desires the best of both worlds (so to speak; there are more worlds than two when it comes to gender) – the freedom of masculinity as well as the comfort of femininity – a sort of balance of gender expression that would lead to a greater happiness than committing oneself fully to just one or the other. Neither of the two available options is ideal, so Orlando desires to be – and, in fact, is – non-binary:

And here it would seem from some ambiguity in her terms that she was censuring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither; and indeed, for the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was a man; she was a woman; she knew

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<sup>58</sup> *Orlando*, 147

<sup>59</sup> *Orlando*, 148

the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each [...] The comforts of ignorance seemed utterly denied her.<sup>60</sup>

Here, in this single paragraph, is the entirety of the novel condensed and neatly summed up. Is Orlando a man or a woman? Depends on when you ask, but the overall answer is that they are neither and both. The way Woolf is willing to play around with gender, looking at both masculinity and femininity with insight rarely found among writers of that time period, shows that the “comforts of ignorance” were denied to her as well. She was painfully aware of these issues and wrote about them. This, of course, is not the first time Woolf has had significant insights about gender, but from my point of view, the one most relevant to *Orlando* is a statement she makes in *A Room of One's Own*:

If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that the great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion [of the masculine and the feminine] takes place that the mind is fully fertilised and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought. But it would be well to test what one meant by man-womanly, and conversely by woman-manly, by pausing and looking at a book or two.<sup>61</sup>

We could extend this and perhaps say that Orlando is, in some ways, the ideal person, at least when it comes to their gender (Orlando, of course, still has some imperfections) – encompassing the best aspects of traditional masculinity and femininity simultaneously. Laura Marcus refers to Woolf's position towards androgyny as being a major aspect of her feminism,<sup>62</sup> but to reduce androgyny merely to a feminist technique obscures Woolf's background as a queer woman who participated in spaces where androgynous presentation would have been more than simply a feminist statement, but a real factor of gender identity. Michel Foucault attempted to construct a similar androgynous ideal in his analysis of the biographical information about an intersex person known to us as Herculine Barbin, trying to analyse this person who existed outside of the binary distinctions of sex (although, based on Barbin's personal records, she identified as a

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<sup>60</sup> *Orlando*, 152

<sup>61</sup> *A Room of One's Own*, 128

<sup>62</sup> Laura Marcus, “Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf,” *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: CUP, 2006) 210

woman, gender-wise).<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately, Foucault's analysis, among other issues, is considered by contemporary intersex activists to be deeply dehumanizing and objectifying. Foucault uses the life and suffering of a real person to illustrate a philosophical point he is trying to make, making a theoretical object out of her, rather than considering her as an autonomous human being who has her own ideas about her gender and sex:

Foucault's use of Barbin's story is then more indicative of his agenda in publishing her manuscript as documentation of the 'happy limbo of a non-identity'—and the masculine, predatory sexual exploits possible within a convent for an individual with a 'non-identity'—than it is of Barbin's perception of herself (Foucault 1980: xiii; Butler 1999: 31–32, 119–135).<sup>64</sup>

It would also be useful to look at how Marilyn R. Farwell, in her analysis of androgyny in *A Room of One's Own*, falls into the common pitfalls of second-wave feminism:

Like so many women writers wanting to write from their own experiences yet knowing well that men will be the final arbiters of their work, Virginia Woolf did not pursue some of her more radical insights into the writings of women. If she had, she would probably have outlined a much more comprehensive theory of androgyny, one which would have acknowledged the individual differences of women and men but insisted on the validity and interdependence of each.<sup>65</sup>

Firstly, she completely avoids *Orlando* as a text which does, in fact, offer a “much more comprehensive theory of androgyny,” but more importantly she criticises Woolf for presenting androgyny as a “fusion” rather than “balance”. This criticism appears to stem primarily from the second-wave failure of recognising gender roles and gendered actions not as innate, but as (at least in large part) socially constructed. The dominant second-wave approach to gender could be summed up as “different but equal”. But both in *Orlando* and in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf avoids this idea, which necessarily creates tension when her perspectives on gender are analysed by second-wave feminists.

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<sup>63</sup> M. Morgan Holmes, “Locating Third Sexes,” *Transformations* 8 (2004)  
<[http://www.transformationsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Holmes\\_Transformations08.pdf](http://www.transformationsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Holmes_Transformations08.pdf)>

<sup>64</sup> Holmes

<sup>65</sup> Marilyn R. Farwell, “Virginia Woolf and Androgyny,” *Contemporary Literature* 16.4 (1975): 451, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1207610>> 3 Aug 2015

Going back to looking at the novel, Shel acts as the opposite of Archduke Harry. The meeting between Shel and Orlando is accidental, whereas the Archduke was continually forcing himself onto Orlando. Shel is an adventurous soul, unlike the Archduke who would spend most of his time at home or shooting game in the woods. Most importantly, however, like Orlando's, Shel's gender identity is not confined within traditional masculinity or femininity. Both Orlando and Shel being to some extent non-binary in terms of their gender identity (at least by the standards of their time) also upsets the traditional idea of heterosexual marriage. Heterosexual marriage is, after all, supposed to be the resolution to the (false) dichotomy between the genders and the sexes. Masculinity balanced out by femininity between two people, as Farwell suggest in the above citation with the word "interdependence". The eternal feminine providing stability and redemption to the masculine. But for Orlando and Shel, that balance is already established on the individual level – what attracts them is their similarity in that regard, a similarity that is so unlikely as to be doubted: "Are you positive you aren't a man?" he would ask anxiously and she would echo, "Can it be possible you're not a woman?"<sup>66</sup> Because they both share the qualities typically associated with the other sex in a society that strictly enforces against such a thing, their mutual surprise is not so surprising.

Woolf was, however, clearly quite careful about preserving the false dichotomy of the sexes while subtly – and, occasionally, not so subtly – putting the gender dichotomy into doubt. Shel could have just as easily been a AFAB (assigned-female-at-birth) person, who has some masculine traits, as is sort of the case for Orlando (although Orlando cannot be described as being AFAB, of course), but doing so could have threatened the publishing of the book and Woolf's business as a publisher, as was the case when *The Well of Loneliness* came out that same year. There is a quotation from when Orlando was on the ship back to England that clearly indicates that Orlando would have been comfortable in continuing to have relationships with women, even though the book presents all of Orlando's relationships as heterosexual at the point when they occurred:

And as all Orlando's lovers had been women, now, through the culpable  
laggardry of the human frame to adapt itself to convention, though she herself

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<sup>66</sup> *Orlando*, 246

was a woman, it was still a woman she loved; and if the consciousness of being of the same sex had any effect at all, it was to quicken and deepen those feelings which she had had as a man.<sup>67</sup>

So, while the invariable heterosexual pairings throughout *Orlando* are unfortunate, it is likely that the absence of same-sex (perhaps rather than same-gender in this context) relationships in *Orlando* is partly the result of Woolf trying to avoid public scrutiny and censorship, rather than implying that the characters were strictly heterosexual – in fact, the implication for most of the main characters is that, if anything, they are bisexual. The situation, then, seems to be that Orlando, instead of having a preference based purely on a partner's sex, has a preference based on the partner's gender, as we clearly see with Shel. So, as is the case throughout most of *Orlando*, it is not really sex that matters in relationships, but rather gender.

*Orlando* is an intricate text, in no small part due to its melding of serious insights with a comedic tone, which historically had lead many people to dismiss some of its most interesting observations about gender as comedic rather than meant seriously. While not a perfect text by any means, as has been shown by its inclusion of a deeply questionable transphobic trope, it is an unparalleled novel, both in its time and today. It is surprisingly contemporary, especially thanks to the fact that sex and gender are distinguished and operate independently of each other, and so densely packed with queer elements ripe for analysis that it should provide a challenge even to contemporary queer readers. While many contemporary queer novels also use feminism and queerness as their cores, too few seem to recognise that this is not a new development and *Orlando* is a prime example of such a novel.

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<sup>67</sup> *Orlando*, 154

### **3. Radclyffe Hall**

#### **3.1. Background**

Whenever we speak about Radclyffe Hall, especially in the context of gender analysis and queerness, there is a certain elephant in the room that needs to be addressed and acknowledged – the question of Hall potentially having been transgender, to use a modern term. Personally, I will use the gender-neutral singular they/them pronouns when referring to Hall, due to the relative lack of concrete information on Hall’s personal identification in terms of gender non-conformity. Of course, I am not a trans historian and I am not in a position to do my own research that would absolutely confirm Hall’s trans masculine inclinations. I do, however, wish to keep the question of Hall’s gender identity rather open than follow the tradition of identifying them as a butch lesbian icon given that, if proven to be untrue (which there exist clear indicators that it might be the case) it would be only one of several cases where somebody who personally identified on the trans masculine spectrum was mischaracterised as a butch lesbian. (An example of that sort of – perhaps even intentional – mischaracterisation would be trans masculine people like Jean Bonnet<sup>68</sup> or George/Charles Hamilton.<sup>69</sup>)

What we can say is this: Radclyffe Hall personally identified as a “congenital invert”<sup>70</sup> a term that originates from Richard Krafft-Ebing, a sexologist who had a very negative view of homosexuality, and which not only described same-gender romantic and sexual interests, but also a person’s expression of gender (i.e. a female “congenital invert” would be interested in women and would be masculine-leaning in terms of gender expression, both of which applies to Hall). Diana Souhami also notes that, at least to an extent, Hall did identify as a man in a way that, from my own personal experience, is somewhat characteristic of a transgender person trying to come to terms with their gender identity – trying to somehow rationalise those feelings by convincing yourself that perhaps you simply were a person of that gender in a previous life:

She also *knew* that she was really a man and loved by God. She had the key to preternatural knowledge and hers was an invincible one. She felt an affinity for Florence, ergo she had lived there in a previous life. She was a changeling from

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<sup>68</sup> Morgan M Page, *One from the Vaults* ep. 16

<sup>69</sup> Morgan M Page, *One from the Vaults* ep. 13

<sup>70</sup> Diana Souhami, *The Trials of Radclyffe Hall* (London: Quercus, 2013) 197

another age. What she wrote, who she was, whom she loved, were controlled by a higher power.<sup>71</sup>

Additionally, Diana Souhami, the author of the biography cited above, intentionally refers to Hall by what appears to have been their preferred name – John, a name that is also used by Una Troubridge, Hall’s greatest lover, in her own biography of Hall and also while talking about them to close acquaintances.<sup>72</sup> This was a name given to them by a previous lover, Mabel Batten, who perhaps felt discomfort at being romantically involved with someone who went by a name as feminine as Marguerite:

Visiting Marguerite’s London house, she thought how much the portrait of her great-great-grandfather John Hall, a surgeon, Marguerite looked. From then on Mabel called her John. More than a fond nickname, this was a symbolic rechristening. It released Marguerite from the hated name her mother had given her and from her discomfort at being a woman. [...] By reconstruction she was not the same gender. She was an English squire from a time-honoured family, with horses, hounds and a wife. For Mabel too it defined the partnership in society’s terms. It was John who opened the doors, carried the bags, hired the servants and of course paid the bills.<sup>73</sup>

From these accounts, it is clear that Hall had a difficult relationship not only towards femininity, but towards womanhood more broadly. As we know, masculine gender expression among AFAB (assigned-female-at-birth) people is not inherently a rejection of womanhood, but can merely be a sign of discomfort with how womanhood is constructed by the society at large or simply a personal preference – as such, masculine gender expression among AFAB people can expand how we think about the category of “woman” by rejecting gender-essentialist notions of what womanhood entails. However, given all the information above, I feel comfortable enough to argue that Hall’s gender expression was not merely based on discomfort with the social construct of femininity, but on something deeper – a masculine gender identity, not merely masculine gender expression.

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<sup>71</sup> Souhami, 77

<sup>72</sup> Una Troubridge, *The Life and Death of Radclyffe Hall*, part 1 - <https://ia600709.us.archive.org/9/items/TheLifeAndDeathOfRadclyffeHallcorrected/0001.htm>

<sup>73</sup> Souhami, 54-55

Lesbian historian Lillian Faderman in her 1981 book *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendships and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* criticises Hall for their embracing of the pathologizing description of “congenital invert” which Faderman, in a clearly transphobic (an extremely common thing among lesbian feminists in the late 1970s and the 80s, the pinnacle of which was the publishing, in 1979, of Janice G. Raymond’s book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*) and inaccurate way, links to the situation of the 1980s transgender community:

Nor is Krafft-Ebbing’s congenital inversion theory dead today: transsexuals are the modern “congenital inverts.” They, and some of the medical men who work with them, are convinced (as their earlier counterparts [referring to people like Hall] were) that they are trapped in the wrong bodies. Most are also fixated (as were their earlier counterparts) on the notion that there is “appropriate” masculine and feminine behavior and that same-sex love is sinful. Thus if a woman loves a woman it must be because she really is a man.<sup>74</sup>

While this analysis is filled to the brim with cissexism and transphobia, it does provide a link between the sexological theories (and not, as Faderman implies, the beliefs of transgender people themselves) about inversion and transgender identities. It is not unreasonable to suggest that, at a time when we already had such non-pathologising and perhaps even liberating terms such as “Sapphist,” Hall simply felt that ideas like Sapphism did not accurately describe their feelings towards their gender and thus instead opted for a pathologising term the definition of which did, in fact, contain some consideration of gender identity.

In fact, Hall’s adoption of masculinity went so far that they eventually started showing signs of a sort of toxic masculinity, a masculinity that is damaging not only to the person who espouses it, but also to those around them:

With Una as her wife, Radclyffe Hall took for herself the old kind of patriarchy. She invaded the domain of men.<sup>75</sup> Her clothes, manners and

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<sup>74</sup> *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 317

<sup>75</sup> As a trans woman, I take deep umbrage with this kind of formulation, given that it has been historically used specifically against trans women who were seen as “men invading women’s spaces”. If we do subscribe to the notion that Hall was, indeed, a trans masculine person then their participation in men’s spaces would have hardly constituted an invasion.

adopted name asserted their power. She hired and more often fired servants. She sailed the Channel in a first-class cabin. If men crossed her, she sued them in the male courts. Order and control she perceived as masculine. [...] Vulnerability and the dreaded name<sup>76</sup> Marguerite she perceived as female. So were friendship, love, feelings and the tyranny of need. The flip side of ‘masculine’ strength was ‘feminine’ weakness.<sup>77</sup>

As I have noted in the introduction, it would not be suitable to apply the contemporary label of “transgender man” onto Hall, as that would constitute an anachronistic characterisation of someone who perhaps would not have felt comfortable using such a term. However, I do not feel so uncomfortable describing Hall as someone whose gender identity most likely lies on the trans masculine spectrum. From their own words to the words of others who knew them well and the general sense of discomfort towards femininity and womanhood, perhaps Hall was, like some other trans masculine people before them, simply remembered as a butch lesbian icon, the idea of which would have certainly been supported by later lesbian literary critics, who in their search for a tradition of lesbian writing applied a scorched earth policy that shoved aside all the nuances of various different queer identities in favour of a simplified, purely lesbian reading.

While working on this section of the thesis, I also decided to contact Morgan M. Page, a trans historian, via Twitter to briefly ask whether she agreed with the interpretation of Radclyffe Hall as a person on the trans masculine spectrum. While, admittedly, Twitter is not the best place for academic discourse, she responded to my question of “I’m writing a thesis partly on Radclyffe Hall and coming to the conclusion that they were on the trans masc spectrum. Thoughts?”<sup>78</sup> simply with “I would agree with that.”<sup>79</sup>

If my and Morgan M. Page’s views are correct, it puts a major breach into interpreting *The Well of Loneliness* as a lesbian novel and as such, I will deliberately focus primarily

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<sup>76</sup> In today’s transgender circles, this would be referred to as a “deadname”.

<sup>77</sup> Souhami, 169-170

<sup>78</sup> @lanthalona, “I’m writing a thesis partly on Radclyffe Hall and coming to the conclusion that they were on the trans masc spectrum. Thoughts?” *Twitter*, 15 Apr 2017  
<<https://twitter.com/Lanthalona/status/853237236518854656>>

<sup>79</sup> @morganmpage, “I would agree with that.” *Twitter*, 15 Apr 2017  
<<https://twitter.com/morganmpage/status/853250968955256832>>

on the questions of gender and further explore the questions of trans masculinity as it applies to the novel.

### 3.2. *The Well of Loneliness*

We should perhaps begin with a brief look at the novel's style, which can, at least in comparison to the techniques and flourishes of Virginia Woolf, be described as rather flat and traditional. In *Mrs Dalloway*, it was Woolf's technique that allowed us to peer into the character's heads as thoughts and emotions swirled around in them, revealing feelings that were hidden to the world otherwise. If we were to simply observe Clarissa Dalloway from the outside, as she appeared to everybody else, we would most likely never know about the feelings she had for other women and her history with Sally. In *Orlando*, the narrator's pose and toying with the clichés of biographical writing lend it a quality of brisk humour and levity. There are no new literary techniques being pioneered in *The Well of Loneliness*, no narrative positions that lend it a particular tonal impulse. As Maureen Duffy notes in the introduction to the 2015 Penguin Modern Classics edition, the book falls squarely into what she describes as "middlebrow fiction"<sup>80</sup> and is remembered today primarily for being the "first lesbian novel in English" (which the possibility of Hall's trans masculine identity must put into question).

Interestingly enough, however, for of all of Hall's focus on "*congenital inversion*," the first section of the novel is curious in that it could easily be interpreted as presenting to the readers an origin of gender identity and sexuality that seems to be primarily based on nurture rather than nature, if we are to use the clichéd distinction.

First of all, Stephen is assigned-female-at-birth, but is the child of a father who deeply desires to have a son to raise, with whom he could do all the traditionally masculine activities a nobleman would do with his son. Unlike in Hall's own personal life, the choice of a masculine name is the father's decision – unlike John Hall, Stephen Gordon is a name that is legally binding and that has the added sense of legitimacy by being granted to Stephen in a baptism.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Maureen Duffy, "Introduction," *The Well of Loneliness* (London: Penguin, 2015) xvii

<sup>81</sup> Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (London: Penguin, 2015) 5-6

Stephen was then raised by her father (I am using female pronouns here merely “for convention’s sake”<sup>82</sup> and because it was Hall herself who chose to apply them to Stephen over male pronouns – and I will respect that) as if she were a son, with all the classic notions of contemporary masculinity impressed onto her.

While I generally try to avoid overly biographical readings, seeing as fiction is fiction and not a reflection of reality, autobiographical elements are very common in queer fiction and *The Well of Loneliness* is no exception. Many parts of the novel scan neatly onto Hall’s personal life and the character of Stephen Gordon is quite clearly a representation of Hall herself. But if that is the case, what are we to make of this first section of the novel, up until the death of Stephen’s father, that appears to be almost idyllic in terms of how Stephen’s “congenital inversion” is not just fostered and embraced by the father, but also essentially prophesied by him before Stephen is even born and begins showing some gendered preferences.

Well, given that Souhami’s biography, *The Trials of Radclyffe Hall*, notes of Hall’s birth:

Her parents parted for ever a month after her birth. Her father, Radclyffe Radclyffe-Hall, known familiarly as Rat, the man whom she so resembled, whose blood alone flowed in her veins, was, so she heard, a degenerate who beat and abused his wife, chased her round the house with a pistol, had sex with the servants and threw a joint of cold lamb at the cook.<sup>83</sup>

The first section of the book can then perhaps be seen as a deeply idealised childhood which Hall never had. A childhood with a father, a father who would recognise their masculine preferences and help Hall hone them. The mother figure who despises Stephen and tries her best to make her conform to the contemporary standards of femininity is, however, closely modelled after Hall’s own mother with which they would regularly get into verbal fights. Una Troubridge describes her as such in *The Life and Death of Radclyffe Hall*: “In the mother there was a violence of temper equal to that of the father, but unaccompanied by intellect or talent of any description. A brainless,

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<sup>82</sup> *Orlando*, 133

<sup>83</sup> Souhami, 5

vain, selfish woman, possessed of an unlimited obstinacy and of a certain shrewdness in compassing her aims.”<sup>84</sup>

If we, then, accept that Stephen is, essentially, a self-insert character for Hall (in some ways idealised, in other ways a more accurate reflection of Hall’s life), it would then be fair to also assume that, just like Hall, Stephen is also trans masculine rather than being a very butch lesbian. Based on my knowledge of queer literature, a large autobiographical influence, both in terms of characters and the lives they live, is a common feature, especially when queer authors write their first novels that focus on queer themes – from Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle* and Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* to Imogen Binnie’s *Nevada*.

In this sense, it would be far more revealing of the novel’s nature to focus not on the novel’s attitude towards lesbian relationships (if Stephen is indeed trans masculine, her relationships with women would be closer to heterosexual relationships), but rather on how the novel conceptualises masculinity and the ways in which masculinity is experienced by those who are not assigned-male-at-birth (AMAB). Such a perspective will allow us to recontextualise the novel as work of trans masculine fiction and grant us deeper insight into Stephen Gordon as a character that goes beyond the traditional, self-serving interpretation of Stephen as a butch lesbian.

Stephen’s experience of masculinity seems to largely be a one where he perceives it as a way of expression that is far more natural and comfortable to her. This could partly be due to the fact that the world into which Stephen is born is a deeply patriarchal world, a world where masculinity is seen as a prerequisite to activity and agency. To say, however, that Stephen embraces masculinity purely as a way to live her life on her own terms, free from the oppression that femininity entails, would be to repeat a thoroughly discredited argument made by many trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) that claims that transgender men and trans masculine people are nothing more than misguided women who embrace masculinity in order to gain access to male privilege and who support patriarchal structures.<sup>85</sup> (Although, as it will be seen, both Hall and Stephen do, in fact, uphold patriarchal structures.)

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<sup>84</sup> Una Troubridge, *The Life and Death of Radclyffe Hall*, part 1 - <https://ia600709.us.archive.org/9/items/TheLifeAndDeathOfRadclyffeHallcorrected/0001.htm>

<sup>85</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008) 100

Let us now, then, look more closely at some textual examples of how Stephen views and experiences masculinity. First of all, there is Stephen's physical appearance:

But in spite of all this Stephen's figure was handsome in a flat, broad-shouldered and slim flanked fashion; and her movements were purposeful; having fine poise, she moved with the easy assurance of the athlete. Her hands, although large for a woman, were slender and meticulously tended; she was proud of her hands. In face she had changed very little since childhood, still having Sir Philip's wide, tolerant expression. What change there was only tended to strengthen the extraordinary likeness between father and daughter, for now that the bones of her face showed more clearly, as the childish fullness gradually diminished, the formation of the resolute jaw was Sir Philip's. His too the strong chin with its shade of a cleft; the well-modelled, sensitive lips were his also. A fine face, very pleasing, yet with something about it that went ill with the hats on which Anna insisted – large hats trimmed with ribbons or roses or daisies, and supposed to be softening to the features.<sup>86</sup>

The passage is fairly long, but it is also incredibly revealing in terms of which features the narrator considers to be Stephen's most attractive ones. Nearly all features described, with the potential exception of the hands, are features that would be traditionally described as masculine – flat chest, broad shoulders, small hips. But Stephen is not presented as attractive in spite of those features – she is presented as attractive precisely because she does have these features. There is no mention of Stephen resembling her mother in any way, yet the narrator makes sure to hammer in the point of how closely Stephen resembles her beloved father. To Stephen, Sir Philip is a role-model of masculinity, the way men ought to look and behave. All of her mother's attempts to make her appear more feminine with hats and clothing (described more closely in the passage following the cited one) are described as failures. When asked to put on a more feminine appearance, the narrator describes the results as making Stephen "a little uneasy" and "far from becoming".<sup>87</sup> As described here, Stephen's masculine presentation is not merely a question of Stephen's personal preference or of practicality (many of Stephen's favourite activities are easier to perform in trousers than in skirts),

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<sup>86</sup> Hall, 72

<sup>87</sup> Hall, 73

but an inseparable part of her very nature. It is femininity that makes Stephen feel and appear unnatural.

There are, however, some genuinely worrying aspects about the degree to which Stephen embraces masculinity as an affirmation of her gender expression – along with masculinity more generally, she also ends up embracing the patriarchal structures and beliefs that go along with it. This is most apparent in the novel's ending, where Stephen clearly believes her views and opinions to be more true and rational compared to those of her traditionally feminine partner, Mary. The relationship between Stephen and Mary is far from that of two equals in terms of how it is presented – it follows the patriarchal structure of a heterosexual relationship, where the masculine partner makes decisions on behalf of both. Adam Parks points to the fact that Radclyffe Hall seems to have supported relationship structures that replicated cisgender, heterosexual systems where masculinity is the element of domination. While his analysis is couched in the assumption that Radclyffe Hall was a cisgender butch lesbian, instead of being a trans masculine person, it is nonetheless an accurate description of Hall's views of marriage and relationships, which are reflected in *The Well of Loneliness*:

Hall's manifest conventionality also determined her conception of women's proper roles in lesbian relationships. Her hope for the future was to see inverts able to marry, so that they could be conventional – that is, heterosexual – moral standards. Lesbian relationships, Hall thought, should conform to the normal pattern found among heterosexuals, that of the aggressive male and the passive female – the protector and the protected. Here, Hall was again following Ellis, for whom "courtship" represented an essential biological process. Michael Baker observes that by adapting this pattern to account for lesbianism, Hall created a contradiction: the female half of the lesbian relation may – and, according to Ellis, *should* – be attracted to a "real" man, rather than to a woman who behaved like one.<sup>88</sup>

This apparent contradiction, is, however, easily resolved by considering Hall or Stephen (or any other trans masculine person involved in a relationship with a woman, for that matter) to be a "real man" rather than a masculine woman. It is then not a contradiction

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<sup>88</sup> Adam Parks, "Lesbianism, History, and Censorship: *The Well of Loneliness* and the Suppressed Randiness of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*" *Twentieth Century Literature* 40.4 (1994): 442, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/441599>> 3 May 2017

of lesbian relationships, but a vision of relationships between a cis woman and a trans masculine person that followed the established gender-essentialist and heterosexist model.

Mary's role is passive, merely supportive, while Stephen is the artist and a rich noble person whose income and family resources support them both. Stephen's belief in her superiority over Mary is clearly manifested in the ending of the novel, where Stephen hatches a scheme which would make Mary abandon her in favour of Martin Hallam, who Stephen believes can give Mary the comfort and status of being the wife of a rich cisgender man, which Stephen is convinced Mary desires. Yet, from Mary's own words, it is clear that her true wish is to stay with Stephen. Nonetheless, Stephen goes forward with the plan, because she thinks that she knows what Mary wants better than Mary herself does. When Mary cries out "All my life I've given...you've killed...I loved you...Cruel, oh, cruel! You're unspeakably cruel..."<sup>89</sup> she is speaking the truth. Ultimately, it is not society, as Stephen was led to believe, that put their relationship in danger and eventually destroyed it, but it was Stephen's own arrogance which stemmed from her belief that, as the masculine person in the relationship, she is always right. Yet the novel seems to fail at this analysis. The focalisation of the scene and the entire situation that proceeds it is set up to make us empathise with Stephen, who herself is responsible for all the bad things that happen in the last chapter.

The idea that the novel fails at analysing toxic masculinity is further supported by the tragic fate of Jamie and Barbara. Just as Stephen's sense of masculine superiority results in her making the decision that ends up destroying her relationship with Mary, Jamie's pride as the breadwinner in her<sup>90</sup> relationship with Barbara ultimately results in Barbara's death and Jamie's suicide. It is not Jamie, however, but Barbara herself who refuses medical aid from Stephen and Mary that would have very likely saved her life and she seems to have done so out of the fear that accepting aid would make Jamie, who was at that point already struggling to keep a roof above her and Barbara's heads, feel even more like a failure:

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<sup>89</sup> Hall, 482

<sup>90</sup> Again, respecting the pronouns used by Hall, rather than making assertions about the character's gender identity. Ultimately, Jamie as a character is not explored enough to assert whether, like Stephen, she could be seen as a trans masculine person.

‘Let us help,’ [Mary] pleaded, stroking Barbara’s thin hand, ‘after all, we’re much better off than you are. Aren’t you two like ourselves? Then why mayn’t we help?’ Barbara slowly shook her head. ‘I’m alright – please don’t talk about money to Jamie.’<sup>91</sup>

The reason why it is fairly clear that Barbara refuses the money not out of her own pride, but out of the fear of offending Jamie is because the idea of Jamie, despite being extremely poor at times, feeling anxious about financial aid from Stephen and Mary had already been firmly and clearly established:

They were not very easy to help, these two, for Jamie, pride-galled, was exceedingly touchy. She would never accept gifts of money or clothes, and was struggling to pay off the debt to her master. Even food gave offence unless it was shared by the donors, which though very praiseworthy was foolish. However, there it was, one just had to take her or leave her, there was no compromising with Jamie.<sup>92</sup>

This paragraph has additional value in that it shows how the narrator themselves seems to establish the more masculine partner in the relationship as the decisionmaker. Jamie and Barbara are “not easy to help” not because both of them refuse aid, but because one of them, the one who positions herself as the dominant person due to being more traditionally masculine, is too proud to accept it. In this paragraph, which is ostensibly about Jamie and Barbara as a couple, Barbara, the traditionally feminine partner, is nowhere to be found. This sort of reduction is clearly a masculine-centric, patriarchal one.

The entire novel seems to be permeated with a certain degree of what contemporary feminism recognises as ‘femmephobia’<sup>93</sup> – a view that often perceives any form of expression traditionally associated as femininity as being inferior and less genuine than more androgynous or masculine forms of expression:

Or perhaps [Mary and Barbara] would be in a more flippant move and they would sit and whisper together, laughing; making tender fun of the creatures

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<sup>91</sup> Hall, 437-438

<sup>92</sup> Hall, 394

<sup>93</sup> Julia Serano, *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2013) 48 (Note: Although the term “femmephobia” is not present in the text, it provides a thorough analysis of its effects)

they loved, as women have been much inclined to do ever since that rib was demanded of Adam. Then Jamie and Stephen would pretend to feel aggrieved, would pretend that they also must hang together, must be on their guard against feminine intrigues. Oh yes, the whole business was rather pathetic.<sup>94</sup><sup>95</sup>

Femmephobia, while present in culture generally as an element of sexism and misogyny, has been clearly observed even within feminist and lesbian communities,<sup>96</sup> both of which are supposed to be staunchly anti-sexist. The novel's femmephobia and general positioning of femininity within a negative space very likely stems from the fact that as an AFAB person, Hall (and, by extension, Stephen) was expected to conform to traditional femininity and therefore had to fight harder to reject it and to carve out a space for herself within masculinity. The issue is not that the novel simply rejects femininity, but that it ridicules it and derides it – feminine people exist to be loved by masculine people and they have very little to no agency of their own.

While the chapter of the novel that talks of Barbara's death and Jamie's suicide acts as its dramatic climax – the rest of it being somewhat subdued in terms of clear action – the entire narrative about the life and death of Jamie and Barbara shows an unexpected, given what it is preceded by, acknowledgement of Stephen's economic privilege. Like John Hall herself, Stephen is largely sheltered from life-and-death societal oppression thanks to the fact that, as a nobleperson who has access to her family's wealth, she is financially secure enough not only to provide for herself but also for Mary. Stephen does not have to deal with the threat of homophobic violence – keep in mind that even heterosexual trans masculine may become victims of homophobic violence and oppression if they are socially perceived as women – because, as a rich person of high birth, Stephen essentially holds so much privilege that she is shielded from most life-threatening bigotry.

This is emphatically not the case for Jamie and Barbara. Born in the Scottish Highland village of Beedles, they, rather uncharacteristically for a love story, were close friends in childhood and as they grew older, this friendship eventually grew into love. But unlike Stephen, who moved to Paris with Mary to live farther away from her mother

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<sup>94</sup> Hall, 393-394

<sup>95</sup> Note: If we were to make a division along the lines of femininity-masculinity rather than woman-man, this novel would not pass the Bechdel test. If we are to interpret both Stephen and Jamie as trans masculine, it definitely would not.

<sup>96</sup> *Excluded*

and have access to the local literary circles, Barbara and Jamie moved to Paris to escape homophobia:

But antagonism no longer restrained through the respect for the gentle and childlike pastor, had made itself very acutely felt – hostile they had been, those good people, to Jamie. Barbara had wept ‘Jamie, let’s go away...they hate us. Let’s go where nobody knows us. I’m twenty-one now, I can go where I like, they can’t stop me. Take me away from them, Jamie!’ Miserable, angry and sorely bewildered, Jamie had put her arm around the girl. ‘Where can I take you, you poor little creature? You’re not strong, and I’m terribly poor, remember.’<sup>97</sup>

In fact, the story of queer flight to places that are (at least perceived to be) more progressive is a very common theme both in older and contemporary queer fiction. Trans author Kai Cheng Thom spoke recently, in an interview for *Bitch Magazine*, about the theme of queer flight as it pertains to her own novel (not a memoir, as the title may suggest), *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl’s Confabulous Memoir* and queer literature more broadly:

Running away is the queer and trans version of the classic hero's journey. It's the queero's journey! (Please forgive me for that. I just had to.) There is a long and powerful artistic/literary tradition of exploring queer coming of age and identity through themes of escape and running away, no doubt because so many of us grow up trapped in abusive and/or repressive environments.

I love the "running away" queer story trope because it is also the inversion of the exile or familial rejection narrative that haunts queer youth, this terror of being thrown out like trash. For the protagoness of *FFNL*, running away is an act of reclaiming her own agency in the face of rejection, of fleeing to the margins in order to find something better, about discovering herself in the face of loss. She dreams about becoming "the greatest escape artist in the world," never again bound to anything or anyone she doesn't choose.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Hall, 391

<sup>98</sup> Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha “Creating a Lush World of Trans Woman Literature: An Interview with Writer and Fierce Trans Femme, Kai Cheng Thom,” *Bitch Media*, Web <[www.bitchmedia.org/article/creating-lush-world-trans-woman-literature/interview-writer-and-fierce-trans-femme-kai-cheng](http://www.bitchmedia.org/article/creating-lush-world-trans-woman-literature/interview-writer-and-fierce-trans-femme-kai-cheng)> 2 May 2017

Stories like *The Well of Loneliness* where queer people are able to live freely thanks to their power and wealth are very rare in reality – poverty and violence affect queer folk in disproportionate numbers. The relative comfort Stephen experiences is often replaced by flight from oppression and violence. In writing the novel, Hall seems to have been somewhat aware of how their privileged position made their life much easier than that of most other queer people. For those living in poverty and under the terror of queerphobic violence, there is much more on the line. For them, it is about survival.

That would explain why the novel's ending that focuses on Mary and Stephen feels so anticlimactic compared to the story of Barbara and Jamie – the former couple breaks up because Stephen feels she knows best, while the latter couple dies trying to survive in a deeply antagonistic society (with some contribution on behalf of Jamie's pride).

Stephen's greatest punishment, as a rich member of high society, is that she ends up feeling sad and empty. While I do appreciate Hall's inclusion of a queer couple from a less privileged background, on the technical side of things, I feel that the novel fails to follow up the dramatic end Barbara and Jamie suffer and ultimately ends on a very unfulfilling note. While disappointing endings can sometimes be used to great effect (as in the trans novel *Nevada*), the ending to *The Well of Loneliness* feels largely devoid of meaning, tacked on to provide some sort of a dramatic situation for Stephen in a vain attempt to balance out the novel.

I am, of course, not the first to make these observations about Hall and Stephen and their relationship towards trans masculinity. Emma Donoghue, a prominent queer writer, notes that: “[...]the novel is so preoccupied with Stephen's gender troubles – rather than merely desire for women – that it is often read nowadays as a transgender narrative rather than a lesbian one.”<sup>99</sup> The issue I have noticed is, however, that while the idea of *The Well of Loneliness* as a transgender narrative is apparently somewhat established, at least according to Donoghue, I struggled to find any extensive, reliable text talking about Hall as a trans masculine person and *The Well of Loneliness* as a transgender narrative. It appears that the tides may be slowly turning, but the decades of lesbian interpretations of the text have not yet been challenged visibly enough.

*The Well of Loneliness* is, ultimately, a novel that, for better or worse, has not survived the test of time and is mostly studied only as an artefact of queer fiction. While for a

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<sup>99</sup> Emma Donoghue, *Inseparable: Desire between Women in Literature* (London: Picador, 2013) 173

long time, it was a fairly closed case to queer literary critics, being simply “the first lesbian novel in English”, critics more skilled than me applying a trans lens to the novel could yield many more insights not only about *The Well of Loneliness* itself, but also about the ways in which past cis lesbian critics have appropriated and erased trans history.

#### 4. Conclusion

I am fully cognisant of the fact that by bringing up things such as Clarissa Dalloway's (and Virginia Woolf's) inclinations towards women *and* men, the question of Orlando's sex versus their gender and Hall's apparent rejection of womanhood, I am problematising the very notion of whether these works and these authors have a place within the canon of lesbian literature. How could someone who may not have even considered themselves a woman written the first openly lesbian novel in English, given that we define "lesbian novel" as a novel that was written by a lesbian and that contains clear lesbian themes? Is not *The Well of Loneliness* then rather the first transgender novel in English when we consider how closely Stephen is modelled after John? When I set out to write this thesis, I did not expect to come to the conclusion that *The Well of Loneliness* cannot be classified as a lesbian novel due to the fact that its writer and its main protagonist are more accurately described as trans masculine and therefore their love for women is not lesbian in the first place. If we define Sapphism as a woman's sexual or romantic attraction to another woman, then we may consider *Mrs Dalloway* a novel than contains Sapphic elements, but it is not, however, a lesbian novel. When we ask the same question about *Orlando*, the limits of terminology such as "Sapphic" or "lesbian" are tested. Can Orlando be considered a Sapphic character if their gender identity is a non-binary one? If Orlando was to date a woman, could we describe their relationship as a lesbian relationship? These are questions I do not feel confident in answering, but I feel that asking them may be just as important, if not more so, than having clear answers to them.

Based on the observations I have made regarding the three texts, I think it is quite safe to say that in terms of their outlook on gender, the two novels by Virginia Woolf are far more progressive than *The Well of Loneliness*. The ideas about gender presented in *The Well of Loneliness* do not appear to diverge very much from the contemporary notions about masculinity and femininity, with the main difference being that Hall is not afraid to present masculine-identified people who were assigned a female gender at birth. Various gender essentialisms permeate the entire text, which while making the text more interesting to analyse, also reduces its potential to be a well-regarded text in the trans literary canon. On the other hand, *Orlando* – a text written by somebody whose gender identity is not at all in dispute – engages with gender on a much more critical

level and, as such, has far more relevance to both contemporary queer readers and those who are interested in the historical development of different attitudes towards gender.

Even just my cursory analysis of these three novels has quite clearly shown the fact that there is still much to discover within them through the application of contemporary queer notions and perspectives. As the category of “queer” continues to expand and the formerly marginalised voices gain more visibility, other people will come back to these and other historical queer texts to make new and relevant observations that the past generations could not or did not want to make. To a transgender person living today, such as me, it is impossible to read *Orlando* without considering the question of non-binary gender identities. This evolution does not happen merely because there are different kinds of queer people living today than in the past, but that we now have our own vocabularies and conceptions of who we are.

By upsetting the old established categories and bringing up these questions, I do not want to somehow harm the canon of lesbian fiction – I am myself a lesbian and I am deeply invested in finding lesbian elements wherever they appear. I am, however, also deeply invested in queerness as a broader category. Where is our canon of bisexual fiction? Where are the roots of transgender fiction? I am afraid that, in their desire to have a shared culture to point to, many lesbian critics applied too broad a brush and painted over a multiplicity of queer experiences with the simple words “lesbian”. This is an ongoing question of a political, if not always numeral, majority. Bisexual and transgender people have been around for as long as lesbians and gay men have, but when we chose to ally ourselves with them, our experiences were often marginalised and dismissed by those who had the most power within the group.<sup>100</sup> Some of our own literature was appropriated and enshrined in the canon of gay literature for the sake of their own empowerment and it is now time for us to reclaim it as rightfully our own.

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<sup>100</sup> *Excluded*

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