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Radclyffe Hall

Richard Dellamora

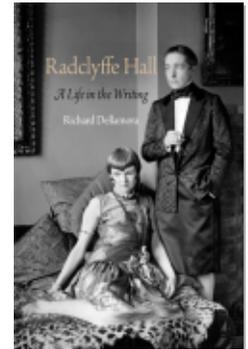
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Symbiosis of Publicity and Privacy

The Slander Trial of 1920

Hall's insistence on making the private public brought her into court in 1920. While biographers have mentioned the action for sexual slander that she brought at this time, none have recognized its importance.¹ The case established the preconditions both for her emergence as a successful novelist and for her decision to write the first novel in English to take female sexual inversion as its focal point. As in the case of the 1928 trial, which resulted in the suppression of *The Well of Loneliness*, the earlier trial was a contest over the permissible limits of the representation of desire between women. In 1920, however, Hall won her case. The victory was a confidence builder that brought her renewed attention from Batten's Sapphic friends while at the same time ensuring a much wider notoriety.²

In January 1919, Hall purchased a home at Datchet outside London for herself and Troubridge. In December, Troubridge had informed her husband that she was leaving him. Promoted to the rank of full admiral with seniority, he returned home to London at the beginning of February. On February 3, he paid his wife an unannounced visit in a final but unsuccessful bid to save his marriage and avoid the scandal of a divorce. Instead, while avoiding a court action, he was forced to settle for a legal separation

with a financial settlement on his wife and child's behalf. The separation was finalized on February 10. Shortly after the publication of the results of Hall's psychical research in December 1919, St. George Lane Fox-Pitt, a longtime member of the Society, showed the article to the admiral at the Travellers' Club. The admiral, who had formerly tolerated his wife's involvement in psychical research with a degree of amusement, was incensed. He complained to Fox-Pitt that his wife's absorption in this activity had permitted Hall to exercise an immoral "influence," which resulted in the break-up of his marriage.³

The setting of Fox-Pitt's exchange with Troubridge, inside a private members' club, calls to mind the situation that Wilde had faced twenty-five years earlier, when the Marquess of Queensberry left an insulting card at Wilde's club. The incident pressured him into filing a suit for libel against Queensberry that, in an unhappy sequence of events, resulted in Wilde's arrest and successful prosecution on grounds of gross obscenity. The clubs, limited to male members, functioned as both supplements and alternatives to domestic life. Markers of social status and respectability and institutions at once private and public, they offered privileged sites for the circulation of gossip, which in turn functioned so as to police the limits of acceptable social behavior. Troubridge was now ready to use his club contacts to curb Hall's extroverted sexual interest in other women. As a result of the conversation, Fox-Pitt decided to block Hall from being coopted for membership of the Council of the Society. To this end, he approached two women who played important roles in the Society: Isobel Newton, the secretary, and Mrs. Helen Salter, editor of the *Proceedings of the Society*. Both women, who later appeared as witnesses at the trial, responded by making use of the offices of the Society to protect both it and its unorthodox female members from scandal. Their success in doing so indicates how late nineteenth-century changes in the status of middle-class women had made it possible for well-positioned women to use the levers of institutional power to protect other women from the effects of male cabals.

Both during discussions with members of the Society at this time and later at trial, Fox-Pitt claimed that the charge of immorality that he made against Hall referred not to her private conduct but to the results of her psychical research. Subsequent commentators, assuming this defense to be specious, have argued that Fox-Pitt was attempting to shield the admiral's name from scandal; but Fox-Pitt did find both the article and the lectures that it was based upon to be immoral. First of all, he had long been opposed

to the direction in which the research of Society members, such as Sir Oliver Lodge, was moving. Fox-Pitt held that psychical research was the objective study of paranormal phenomena. It was not directed toward drawing inferences—as Lodge did in *Raymond*—about such topics as whether or not individual personality survived death, much less the self-consciously modern system of religious beliefs that Lodge built up around this topic in the book. From Fox-Pitt's point of view, the case of Hall demonstrated the delusive and demoralizing effects that followed from spiritualist excesses. At the trial, he would portray Una Troubridge as a hysteric.⁴

The *Times* covered the trial on the same inside page on which it daily recorded the peccadilloes of the rich and famous. The article "Psychical Research: Spirits of the Dead" and other notices dealing with such items as divorce cases and jewelry thefts functioned in the first instance as forms of entertainment in a democratic, leveling age. But gossip and domestic scandal also served as touch points in setting off moral panics and prompting calls to order by elite males. Emphasizing Hall's social status, the article identified her as "a member of the council of the Society for Psychical Research," an upper-middle-class group with strong ties to men's and women's colleges at Cambridge University (4).⁵ Her counsel introduced her as "a woman of independent means" and opened his remarks by detailing her relations with the admiral and his wife. In the course of these, he mentioned that a year earlier the admiral had "suggested" that "for the future, Lady Troubridge should make her home with the plaintiff, whose means were much larger than those of the Admiral" (4).

Hall doubtless enjoyed the put-down. But much though the case was another example of an upper-middle-class domestic dispute and much though Hall disliked having herself and her lovers characterized by Fox-Pitt as "immoral," she resented as much or more the onslaught against her intellectual credibility. Expressed in terms of gender, the attempt by Fox-Pitt to demonstrate the silliness and credulity of Hall's account of spirit life had larger implications for the disallowing of female speech on serious matters—especially at a time when women had for the first time won the right to cast ballots in parliamentary elections. It was extremely important to Hall to affirm that she was qualified to speak in public on paranormal phenomena. Cross-examined by Fox-Pitt, who chose to defend himself in the suit, she stated that she spoke not *in propria persona* but as a "scientific investigator" in the field of "psychology" ("Psychical Research," 4). This claim was consonant with Lodge's description of psychical research as "a

genuine [if new] branch of psychological science.”⁶ Fox-Pitt was having none of it. He retorted, “This paper of yours is scientific rubbish, quite unworthy of the society, and its publication is extremely harmful. It has produced a condition of mind which I consider immoral” (“Psychical Research” 4).

In addition to its focus on Hall, the trial had wider implications. For one thing, it figured in an ongoing conflict among different factions within upper-middle-class and upper-class English society. This struggle resulted in a number of courtroom battles fought out before and during World War I, and it is the significance of the Hall trial in this sequence that is the object of my inquiry. The first of the cases in question was a libel suit brought against Arthur Ransome by Lord Alfred Douglas after the publication of Ransome’s biography of Oscar Wilde in 1912. A critical and commercial success, the biography did much to rehabilitate Wilde’s reputation at the expense of Douglas, his lover at the time of the trials, who was portrayed as the cause of Wilde’s downfall.⁷ With the assistance of Robbie Ross, Wilde’s friend, former lover, and legal executor, Ransome’s defense produced previously unpublished sections of Wilde’s *De Profundis* that made clear the intimate character of his connection with Douglas. As a result of the revelations, Douglas lost the suit, his wife, and legal custody of his son.⁸ In effect, he had sacrificed his efforts to normalize his life to his greater need to attempt to relieve himself of responsibility for Wilde’s debacle.

The case makes clear the symbiotic relationship between publicity and privacy in emergent mass-media culture. In the courtroom and in the press, the realm and meanings of privacy were defined through the struggle over the publication of sensitive material. The case was also significant insofar as Ransome’s biography helped resuscitate Wilde’s legacy. In the positive reception of the book and in Ransome’s success at trial, aestheticist culture, including its feminist and male homosexual implications, began to find a respectable place within the more orthodox and northern strain of Liberalism that grew out of Philosophical Radicalism and Protestant Nonconformity. A leading figure in this rapprochement was Margot Asquith, wife of Liberal Prime Minister Henry Asquith, Earl of Oxford.

Turning against both Wilde and Ross following the first trial, Douglas determined to destroy both men, in part by publishing his own memoirs, *Oscar Wilde and Myself* (1914), and in part by accusing Ross, in a letter sent to top government officials, of gross indecency. The address of the letter to leading politicians indicates how aware Douglas was of the cultural-political

implications of the rehabilitation of Wilde. By forcing Ross to sue him, Douglas hoped to undo the conciliation of utilitarian progressivism with aestheticist culture that I describe above. In response to his attack, Ross felt obliged to sue Douglas for libel. Before the action went to trial, Ross was able to demonstrate that Douglas had been involved in a conspiracy to trump up charges of pedophilia against him. Unfortunately, however, Ross chose not to withdraw the suit at this point, and in the trial that followed in November 1914, Douglas was able to produce witnesses to testify to Ross's involvement in male homosexual circles. As a result, he was forced to drop the action and resign his posts as Valuer of Pictures and Drawings for the Inland Revenue as well as the London directorship of the Johannesburg Art Gallery.⁹

The third suit was brought by the modern dancer Maud Allan, under the aggravated circumstances of right-wing moral panic in the final months of World War I. Allan lost, and her reputation also suffered. Again, the legacy of Wilde was implicated since the action arose out of an attempt to mount a private production of his play *Salomé*, which had been banned from public performance in England since 1892. The Allan trial opened on May 29, 1918, at a time when war weariness and hysteria were at their high point. Hall, in preparing her case, chose to hire Ellis Hume-Williams, the same lawyer who had represented Allan (Medd, 89).

Although the trials focused on particular people, individual rights and cultural innovation were at stake. The defendants in the trials were strongly opposed to the experimental approach to living one's life that Wilde had advocated with wit, elegance, and seductive charm in the 1890s. In the years immediately before World War I, an alliance between Bohemians and leading members of society had resulted in a cultural moment in which both Wilde and his stance were revalidated. Briefly, it looked as though the climate of reaction following the trials of 1895 might be dispersed. The advent of World War I, however, provided an opportunity for men on the far right, such as Douglas, to attack successfully such people as Ross and Allan. Wilde was once again turned into a symbol of all that was corrupt in modern life. By early 1918, with the war in stalemate, casualties high, and the Germans about to begin a major offensive on the Western Front, right-wing ideologues were able to inflame an atmosphere of moral panic that led political moderates to fear the outbreak of a popular insurrection following the verdict in the Allan trial (Hoare, 185). In this series of trials, Hall's suit was the first to break the pattern of right-wing success. And

although Douglas and his allies were not finally defeated until he himself was successfully sued by Winston Churchill and briefly imprisoned in 1923, Hall's success in 1920 marked a turning point.

The tactic pursued by Douglas and his associates was to maneuver their targets into suing them for libel. The resulting trials, widely covered in the press, were used by the defendants as occasions for arguing that moral corruption on the home front served the purposes of the German enemy. Sexual and cultural dissidence were linked as disguised forms of treason and subversion. Hall's 1920 action began in a similar way. Fox-Pitt, Douglas's former brother-in-law, laid accusations with the Society that Hall was "a grossly immoral woman."¹⁰ Hall had little recourse except to challenge these allegations or to resign from the Society. Earlier, when she had reported on the results of her psychical research to the members of the Society in two public lectures delivered early in 1918, Fox-Pitt had taken alarm. When late in 1919 he learned she had been nominated for membership to the Council of the Society, he intervened to protest the nomination on grounds of her bad character. He also slandered Batten, Hall's deceased, former lover, as "a most objectionable person." And, for good measure, he complained that Hall, who exercised "a great influence" on Una Troubridge, had contributed to her mental instability and destroyed her marriage.¹¹ After attempting unsuccessfully through her lawyer to persuade Fox-Pitt to retract the allegation, Hall felt compelled to sue. In a trial held on November 18 and 19, 1920, the jury reached a verdict in Hall's favor, awarding her £500 in damages.¹²

Fox-Pitt's charges were, of course, personal, and they referred to private behavior. But their significance is public. Fox-Pitt claimed that Hall's approach to psychical research had in effect demoralized the Society and lowered standards of public decency. In the case, what is personal is in effect also public. For Fox-Pitt the transfer is automatic, and, despite the efforts of the trial judge to maintain a separation between individual character, scientific investigation, and the public presentation of self, psychical research as practiced by Lodge and Hall merged all three. The practice of Spiritualism had already been made public as a part of the wartime mobilization of the civilian population, in particular of women and especially the mothers of participants. Not surprisingly, the representation of women in this mobilization was conservative. Women were characterized in private, domestic terms, as "mother and house prop," as one medium put it (Lodge, 130). These were the loving women on whose behalf young men

sacrificed their lives. In this highly charged context, Hall's appropriation of Spiritualism to affirm loving friendship between women was a startling affront both to the scientific pretensions of psychical research and to the politics of mass mobilization.

Hall's turn to psychical research took place under the influence of Lodge, a respected physicist and former president of the Society, who was also a pioneer of wireless telegraphy.¹³ The association of his metaphysical speculations with advances in technology lent psychical research an aura of contemporary innovation. In *Raymond*, Lodge detailed the experience of his family in attempting to communicate with his son Raymond, who had been killed in action in France in September 1915.¹⁴ Lodge sets the tone of the book in the dedication of the volume, in which he thanks Raymond's "Mother and Family . . . for Permission to Use Private Material for Public Ends" (v). The sudden and unanticipated loss of thousands of young men of the middle and upper classes in the opening year of the war had proven extremely disruptive on the home front. Spiritualism offered an opportunity for widows and bereaved mothers to find solace; at the same time, it offered them a way to contribute to the war effort by lending support to others who mourned, both in and outside the family. Speaking of the private information disclosed in the book, Lodge says, "I should not have [published this information] . . . were it not that the amount of premature and unnatural bereavement at the present time is so appalling that the pain caused by exposing one's own sorrow and its alleviation, to possible scoffers, becomes almost negligible in view of the service which it is legitimate to hope may thus be rendered to mourners, if they can derive comfort by learning that communication across the gulf is possible" (vii–viii). Making the patriotism of the effort clear, he says, "I have endeavoured to state the evidence fully and frankly for the persistent existence of one of the multitude of youths who have sacrificed their lives at the call of their Country when endangered by an aggressor of calculated ruthlessness" (85).

Lodge's reports of sittings communicate something of the scale of loss. At times, Feda, the medium Mrs. Leonard's control, says that she can see hundreds of spirits. And after contact is made with Raymond, he speaks of his role in offering solace to the newly deceased. Feda reports, "He seems to know what the work is. The first work he will have to do, will be helping at the Front; not the wounded so much, but helping those who are passing over in the war. He knows that when they pass on and wake up, they still feel a certain fear. . . . Some even go on fighting; at least they want to; they

don't believe they have passed on. So that many are wanted where he is now, to explain to them and help them, and soothe them. They do not know where they are, nor why they are there" (126–27). Appeals are also directed to civilians. Participating in séances is part of their contribution to the war effort. If they do not do so, they will be letting down those who have died on their behalf. A deceased adolescent, for example, after speaking to Raymond, reports to his mother: "If you people only knew how we long to come, they would all call us" (120).

Lodge specifies three aspects of *Raymond*. First is the personal imperative, "the demand of affection" which requires that one make every effort to assure oneself both of the continued existence of a lost beloved and of their continuing well-being. Second is the component of "scientific interest" (83). Most of Part II of the book is given over to showing how the sittings produce evidence that Raymond continues to exist. He and other communicators are reported to be eager, even desperate, to prove the point.¹⁵ The third component is "missionary zeal" (83). Psychical research offers an opportunity to prove that personality persists after death and that it is possible to communicate across the boundary that separates "the earth plane" from "the astral plane." Interlocutors from beyond the grave emphasize the immense value of the work that Lodge is doing, and Feda is reassuring: "Raymond really is happy now. He doesn't say this to make you feel satisfied. He is really happy now. He says this [i.e., psychical research] is most interesting, and is going to be fifty times more interesting than on the earth plane. There is such a big field to work in. Father and he are going to do such a lot together. He says, 'I am going to help for all I am worth'" (159–60).

Hall's preoccupation with psychical research after Batten's death had a place in efforts by members of the Society to promote Spiritualism as a means of bolstering civilian morale. Before Batten's death, Hall resented the fact that her partner's precarious state of health prevented her from volunteering for medical service on the Continent. Afterward, however, attempts to communicate with Batten became a way of fulfilling a civic duty.¹⁶ Hall and Troubridge also helped Lodge reply to the many letters that he received from mourning survivors after the publication of *Raymond*.

Expression of extreme, barely suppressed feeling was part of the generic structure of the sittings. In *Raymond*, for example, the evidential portion of the volume reaches a climax when a medium in trance grasps the hand of

Raymond's brother, Alec, and speaks to him in the voice of Raymond (167). At such moments, the scientific aspect of psychical research is suspended. Sitters are unable to continue taking notes, and commentators draw the veil over what is described as privileged private communication. It is important to remember that these sublime private moments are fashioned by means of the genres of the research essay, lecture, and book. Public discourse in effect constructs private. After these intervals, moreover, bourgeois decorum is restored. And again it is femininity that is the carrier of order and restraint. At the end of the session with Alec, for instance, Lodge describes his wife, who was also present at the sitting: "Lady Lodge impressed me considerably with the genuine and deeply affecting character of the above episode of personal control. It was evidently difficult to get over for the rest of the day. I doubt if the bare record conveys much though it may to people of like experience" (170).

When Lodge speaks of the "missionary zeal" that animates Raymond, he has in mind Part III of the volume, which explicates the ideology and religious mythology of Spiritualism. Although Hall and Troubridge came to disagree with Lodge on both scores (Baker, 117), the tripartite structure of psychical research in *Raymond* informs their published paper. Hall and Troubridge's innovation is to direct this structure to a new end: namely, that of affirming emotional and, implicitly, sexual ties between women. This turn to the private, the domestic, the affectional, and the sexual, in a world of exclusively female relations, in effect perverts the special functions that Spiritualism had assumed during the war. In this respect, when Fox-Pitt claimed both before and during the trial that Hall's research was "immoral," he was correct. It is important to recognize how bold Hall and Troubridge's redirection of psychical research was. For both women, involvement in the work of the Society provided ways of making public their newly established partnership with the moral support of Society members and with its prestige behind them. The public delivery and subsequent appearance in print of the results of their research lent them a measure at once of celebrity and intellectual seriousness. From his perspective, Fox-Pitt perceived quite accurately the heretical, even blasphemous uses to which they put spiritualist ideology.

To this point, I have emphasized the woman-centered character of Hall's research. Hall's public presentation of self during the trial, however, puts this focus in a new light. When called to testify, she appeared "soberly

dressed in a long dark jacket and skirt with a pale stock and high stiff collar” (Baker, 128). This presumably is how Hall thought a serious psychological researcher should look.¹⁷ But the masculine objectivity thereby connoted is doubled by masculine suggestion of another sort. Hall’s garb places her study of female love and friendship in the context of the interest of a person who resists conventional categorization as a woman. This particular woman’s commitment to love between women issues from a gender-crossing stance. The stance may in turn connote the more active sexual interest that was usually associated at the time with men. The implicit gender transgression of Hall’s costume connotes scientific detachment in one register and sexual nonconformity in another.

Hall’s masculine style and the flirtatious attention that she showed to other women at Society meetings are sometimes regarded as eccentricities deemed permissible to a wealthy, upper-middle-class woman in her day. Hall’s “lordly” or “mannish” manners can also be seen as drawing upon a long tradition of aristocratic, libertine behavior. In both cases, her performance of sexual dissidence is inconceivable without the simultaneous assertion of class privilege. This assertion, however, rested, as she well knew, on a shaky foundation since Hall, like some of the other American interlopers in England, had money but not class. Equally important, she lacked family connections in England that could shield her against allegations of license and immorality. This singularity contributes to the social isolation with which she characterizes the crossgendered heroines of her fiction. Her growing absorption in both psychological research and Troubridge accentuated this isolation, cutting her off from her American relatives, from Batten’s family, and from some members of the feminist and Sapphic artistic and social circles to which Batten had introduced her.

Rather than being seen as a privilege bestowed by class then, Hall’s gender-crossing ways are better understood as the expression of a self-consciously modern, female dandyism. Hall is a creative refashioner of the dandyism that Vernon Lee in *Miss Brown* (1884) associates with the Aesthetic movement and that Wilde epitomized in English commercial, artistic, and social life of the 1880s and 1890s. And, as in Wilde and in the writing of Charles Baudelaire, Hall’s dandyism is best seen as an aspect of the emergence of democratic culture, a culture that also gave unprecedented importance to celebrity and the politics of scandal. As Jodie Medd has suggested in another context, Hall’s self-invention helps define literary and cultural Modernism. This effect is as definitive in the 1920s as the affirmation of

sexual and emotional ties between men was in the late Victorian period among a disparate group, including such men as Wilde, Walt Whitman, John Addington Symonds, Edward Carpenter, and young “Bosie” Douglas. Wildean dandyism was likewise reinvented in the style and craft of Noël Coward and Ivor Novello in the 1920s, but the specifically female appropriation is more central.¹⁸

Hall and Troubridge invested a great deal of time, energy, and money in psychical research from the autumn of 1916 onward. While Batten’s death had threatened to bring their affair to an end, their investigative efforts put their relationship on a new footing. When they visited Lodge’s family as house guests in 1917, they did so “openly as a ‘couple’ renewed by love” (Cline, 134). By January 1918, Troubridge was able to record: “J.s.I’ve m.L and I’ve m.y” [John said I have married Ladye and I have married you] (Cline, 137). This gain was, however, accompanied by a sharp narrowing of Hall’s circle of intimates. Hall initially attended sittings with Dorothy Clarke, her cousin and former lover, whose husband had recently been killed in action. Troubridge soon displaced her. And after Hall’s lectures, Cara Harris, Batten’s daughter, protested to the Society that Hall had excluded her from the sessions (Baker, 106). Both exclusions were necessary if the psychic union of Batten, Hall, and Troubridge was to be achieved.

Hall and Troubridge needed a setting in which to play out their new status. As the visit with the Lodges suggests, the Society provided them with a new circle of respected friends and acquaintances in which to do so. As I have mentioned, Lodge’s work and that of other Society members has its conservative aspects, but the Society also offered a positive environment for such nonconformists as Hall and Troubridge. One of their friends and collaborators in the Society, for example, was Mrs. Eleanor Sidgwick, widow of Henry Sidgwick and second president of Newnham College. Sidgwick’s husband, a lifelong friend of Symonds and a cofounder of the Society, was a celibate whose strongest erotic attachments were to the male friends of his youth. Symonds was his most important friend.¹⁹ Faced with the crisis of conscience experienced by Symonds in face of his same-sex desires, Sidgwick developed a theory of ethical reserve, which validated an experimental approach to personal morality on the part of a small vanguard of individuals. This position validated sexual nonconformity on the grounds that lives such as Symonds’s would provide new knowledge that could be put to general use.²⁰ The position provided a philosophical, scientific rationale for sexually dissident behavior.

Hall and her partner responded to the new setting in a spirit of mischievous provocation. Years later, a former member recalled, “Radclyffe Hall was extremely aggressive in manner, and always had an eye for the ladies!” On another occasion, Troubridge startled the chairman by recounting a dream of hers, beginning, “Last night I had a most strange dream so I turned to John and said, ‘Darling, I’ve just had such a dream.’”²¹ Sidgwick’s theory provided a philosophical basis for leading a double life, and his theory of “esoteric morality” (Schultz, 26) helped create the climate of opinion that Hall found within the Society. For their part, however, Hall and Troubridge were neither secretive nor discreet. In the preceding chapter, I argued that they were drawn to psychical research by converging personal agendas. Through it, Hall was able to reconcile herself with the deceased partner whom she had betrayed. Troubridge for her part was able to reestablish her connection with Hall on a new basis, to put her marriage behind her, and to enter a partnership that would continue until Hall’s death in 1943. But how did the two women understand love between women? What was the basis on which Hall and Troubridge affirmed that love in their essay? And what was at stake in their defense of it?

In the first place, Hall was unwilling to relinquish to Fox-Pitt the right to characterize her relations with other women. Characterizing Hall and Batten as immoral, implicitly he identified them as lesbian, in the senses that were attached to that word during the war. Expanded employment opportunities for women, new political rights, and a soaring divorce rate provoked strong male anxieties about women at this time. In the Allan sensation, these anxieties attached both to the primary sexual characteristics of the female body and to the possibilities of desire between women. Because of the difficulty that men experienced in describing sexual practices between women and because of the public silence that usually surrounded this topic, female-female desire tended to be peculiarly nameless.²² This fact made it especially useful as a phantasm to which could be attached public fear, rage, and ignorance about the state of the Allied war effort in the difficult early months of 1918.²³

In 1921, members of Parliament attempted to criminalize sexual intimacies between women for the first time. One member named, curiously enough, Sir Ernest Wild, introduced a clause to extend the amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act under which Wilde had been tried and found guilty so as to include “gross indecency” between women.²⁴ Passed in the House of Commons, the bill failed in the House of Lords. Fox-Pitt’s

allegations against Hall followed the pattern already set in the Allan trial. In both cases, women were chastised for subverting institutions to immoral ends—in one instance, the theater club, and in the other, the Society for Psychical Research. These are institutions of a particular sort. Theater clubs and the Society were institutions composed of private members some of whose events were open to the public. These points of crossover permitted the circulation of material to which the public might otherwise be denied access on the legal ground that it was obscene. Both Fox-Pitt and Noel Pemberton Billing, in the Allan trial, condemn these settings as sites of lesbian contagion.²⁵

Fox-Pitt described Hall as a “vulgar climber” and Batten as “a woman who was a most objectionable person.”²⁶ These epithets suggest a specific context for anti-lesbian moral panic in English class politics. Earlier, I observed that the trial attempts to police the limits of the representation of desire between women. Fox-Pitt and others like him were, however, equally concerned about policing entry to the worlds of the arts, Society, and national politics. The targets of men like Douglas, Fox-Pitt, and Billing were also, not coincidentally, un-English. For example, although the son of a leading professional, Wilde was born and raised in Ireland and took his first undergraduate degree there. Allan was born in Canada and lived in the United States. Her brother was convicted of murder in the double homicide of two young women.²⁷ Hall’s mother was an American widow, considered “vulgar” by her English in-laws at the time when she married Hall’s father (Baker, 10). In the parlance of Wilde’s drawing-room comic melodramas, to them she was an adventuress. For her part, Hall lacked school ties in England and was excluded from her father’s family after her parents’ early divorce. As a young woman, Hall hunted, ate at fashionable restaurants, and visited European spas; but she remained socially ungrounded, a position offset only in part by her reputation as a writer of poetry and songs.²⁸

Mabel Batten offended in a different way. The daughter of a high-ranking Anglo-Indian official and a leading figure within London’s musical salon culture, Batten signaled the survival into Edwardian society of the alliance of aesthetic with aristocratic culture. Batten enjoyed cordial relations with her much older husband, who had served as private secretary to the British viceroy of India, Robert, Earl of Lytton. She also engaged in affairs with Edward Prince of Wales, with other men, and with women as well. Her reputation as a woman of “quite depraved” (Cline, 62) sexual tastes together with her access to artistic circles, to society, and to the Court

identified Batten both with what some saw as the moral turpitude of the 1890s and with the easygoing mores of Edward's circle. Since the late 1880s, moral conservatives, both on the left and the right, had attempted to curb the flamboyance of members of this group and to enforce upon them at least the appearance of moral and social conformity.²⁹

This struggle was also political. The resuscitation of Wilde's name was associated with Asquith's Liberal premiership and with his wife, Margot, both of whom were sponsors of Ross. During the war, Margot, who was also a friend and benefactor of Allan, was accused of having sexual and emotional ties with other women.³⁰ Billing's right-wing newspaper, the *Vigilante*, for example, published Douglas's satirical attack:

Out there in Flanders all the trampled ground
Is red with English blood, our children pass
Through fire to Moloch. Who will count the loss
Since here "at home" sits merry Margot, bound
With lesbian fillets, while in front of her brass
"Old Squiffy" hands the purse to Robert Ross?³¹

Members of the circle who attacked Asquith were also anti-Semites. And, once the war began, he suffered from the liability of having as close friends a number of wealthy German Jews.³² For Fox-Pitt, the point of bringing up the fact that Batten was a "most objectionable person" was to link the "incipient dementia" of Hall's essay to a social world very much on the defensive. Batten's alleged behavior characterized that world as both cause and effect of contemporary degeneracy—or "lunacy," as Fox-Pitt put it.³³

Anti-lesbian homophobia peaked in the Maud Allan controversy of 1918. At the same time at which Hall was lecturing to members of the Society and the general public, Billing, an Independent member of Parliament with connections to the proto-fascist, new National Party, published an attack on a production of *Salomé* scheduled for presentation by Allan and others at a private theater club. Admiral Troubridge had links to the National Party, as did his sister, Laura Hope. His son by his first marriage, moreover, served as Billing's political agent. Billing was well informed about Hall and Troubridge's relationship.³⁴

The Allan scandal began with the following item, placed by Billing in the *Vigilante* on February 16:

THE CULT OF THE CLITORIS

To be a member of Maud Allan's private performance in Oscar Wilde's *Salome* one has to apply to a Miss Valetta, of 9, Duke Street, Adelphi, WC. If Scotland Yard were to seize the list of these members I have no doubt they would secure the names of several of the first 47,000. (Hoare, 91)

"The first 47,000" was Billing's code for a list of names of compromised English subjects in the possession of German intelligence. As Billing's newspaper had reported in January 1918, in its earlier incarnation as the *Imperialist*,

There exists in the Cabinet Noir of a certain German Prince a book compiled by the Secret Service from reports of German agents who have infested this country for the past 20 years. . . . In the beginning of the book is a precis [*sic*] of general instructions regarding the propagation of evils which all decent men thought had perished in Sodom and Lesbia. . . . There are the names of 47,000 English men and women . . . , [*sic*] Privy Councillors, wives of Cabinet Ministers, even Cabinet ministers themselves, diplomats, poets, bankers, editors, newspaper proprietors, and members of His Majesty's Household . . . [*sic*] prevented from putting their full strength into the war by corruption and blackmail and fear of exposure. (Hoare, 1)

Billing's sensational allegations about the subversion of national security were based in a fantasy of sexual contagion emanating from the primary sexual characteristics of the female body ("the Clitoris"). Fantasies about the oversexed female body were provoked by the rapid increase in marital breakdown during and after the war. Between 1913 and 1921, the divorce rate increased sixfold (Medd, 97). While unleashed female desire might move in any of a number of directions, Dr. Serell Cooke and other witnesses labeled it as lesbian. This desire, imputed to Allan, was understood to subsume the entire range of sexual perversions that witnesses found in Wilde's play, including "incestuous lust" (Hoare, 116), sadism, male homosexual desire, and necrophilia. In testimony on behalf of the defense during the trial, one witness identified the clitoris as "a superficial organ that, when unduly excited or over-developed, possessed the most dreadful influence on any woman, that she would do the most extraordinary things

if she was over-developed in a superficial sense” (Hoare, 126). Dr. Cooke explained that the presentation of Wilde’s play could set off an orgiastic scene: a “person of perverted instincts . . . would take extreme delight in the whole play. . . . It would appeal to them immensely, they would probably have sexual excitation, and even orgasm, watching the play” (Hoare, 146–47).

Lesbian desire as the trope of individual and social monstrosity posed a difficulty for Hall. The term’s traditional Sapphic connections were overwhelmed by its association with individual and group degeneration (Hoare, 142). Under the circumstances, Hall needed to look elsewhere for language to refer to sexual and emotional ties between women. Earlier, in her published poetry, she had written ardent, sun-kissed Sapphic lyrics. Suitable vehicles for passionate expression, they did not invoke long-term commitments between two women. Another alternative was the rhetoric of female devotion familiar within female social purity, a language that regularly blurred the line between shared affection among anti-sex women who nonetheless were married and bore children and that which existed between single women firmly committed to emotional and at times sexual ties with other women.³⁵ More generally, the rhetoric of female friendship might refer either in conformist directions, as Sharon Marcus argues in *Between Women*, or might figure, as Martha Vicinus demonstrates, in emotional and sexual relationships that drew freely upon the language and passions of evangelical Christianity.³⁶ A fourth alternative existed among Roman Catholics who accepted the sexological argument that homosexual desire, while abnormal, was not unnatural. Attempting to square the circle between scientific tolerance and Roman Catholic moral teaching, Marc André Raffalovich in *Uranisme et Unisexualité* (1896) had called not for the suppression of homosexual difference but for the choice of celibacy by homosexual Catholics. Raffalovich went so far as to argue that, precisely because of their willingness to sacrifice sexual intimacy during their lifetimes, male homosexuals might be especially suited to the demands of the Roman Catholic priesthood.³⁷ Finally, there was the language of science, which described female same-sex desire in terms of sexual inversion, terminology that Hall would turn to in *The Well of Loneliness*.

In 1920, Hall’s preferred choice and that of her lovers was a language of female love and friendship, often crossed with the rhetoric of male friendship tradition. Both Hall and Troubridge understood intimacy between women in these terms. For example, at the time of Hall’s death,

Troubridge memorialized their relationship within the terms of a separatist female friendship tradition. In a letter posthumously written to “John,” she confided: “I feel I must leave an unequivocal record of our life and love, just as the Ladies [i.e., of Llangollen] did, to cheer and encourage those who come after us” (Ormrod, 285). But Troubridge also understood her commitment to Hall as existing within the terms of male friendship writing that I have explored in *Friendship’s Bonds*. To her literary executor, Troubridge remarked that the relationship had been a “marriage of true minds” (Ormrod, 114). This reference to Shakespeare’s sonnet 116 inserts her union into a specifically male homoerotic literary tradition: in the first instance, referring to William Shakespeare’s idealized friendship with a young man, whom many have identified with William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke. In the second instance, the allusion calls to mind Wilde’s fictional recasting of the debate over the identity of this friend in his short story “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” (1889).³⁸ The phrase links the best-known twentieth-century relationship between two women and the years at the end of the nineteenth century when the tradition of male friendship writing was actively adapted to the purposes of homophile apology.

For her part, Batten had called upon male friendship tradition when she gave Hall the nickname John, after David and Jonathan, the heroic pair of friends in the Hebrew Bible, who “in their death . . . were not divided” (II Samuel 1:23; Cline, 66). On October 2, 1916, in the first joint sitting taken by Hall and Troubridge, Batten communicated through Feda: “There is more in our love than there has ever been between two women before. . . . I am sure we feel more like married people do to each other” (Ormrod, 99). The linking of friendship with marriage was not customary within male friendship tradition, in which the perfect friendship of two men was contrasted to the secondary sort of friendship that could exist within marriage. In addition, given the failure of Troubridge’s marriage, neither she nor Hall had much reason to recommend marriage. But all three women were among others, such as the lovers Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf, who valued marriage not as it was normally understood but as it might become. In June 1929, in a joint BBC radio interview with Vita and her husband, Harold Nicolson, the latter comments to the Director of Talks, Hilda Matheson, that marriage is “a plant, not a piece of furniture. It grows; it changes; it develops.”³⁹ Nicolson and Sackville-West had an open marriage, in which both engaged in affairs with same-sex partners. Sackville-West’s sexual flamboyance was well known, and Matheson herself

was a Sapphist. In this context, marriage means something quite different. Both Sackville-West and Woolf project it as a metaphor of the stability that they sought in a long-term relationship, “like a sunny harbour to me,” as Sackville-West put it.⁴⁰ For the trio of Batten, Hall, and Troubridge, this safe space was a location to be worked toward.

Hall was fortunate in the outcome of the trial. The jury accepted Fox-Pitt’s contention that his accusations of immorality were directed against spiritualist practice rather than toward the practice of “unnatural vice” (Baker, 130). When the judge advised them that Fox-Pitt’s intentions were immaterial, however, the jury found in her favor and assessed £500 against the defendant. The latter decided to appeal, and in March 1921 a new trial was ordered. Hall, however, at the advice of her lawyer, decided to declare victory and desist. As for the Society, its prestige took a heavy hit.⁴¹

Hall and Troubridge continued to attend sittings twice weekly for two hours until 1922, and Troubridge published a carefully researched and considered psychological analysis of mediumship in the journal of the Society that year.⁴² Hall was elected to the Council of the Society annually between 1921 and 1924. Significantly, when she resigned that year, she gave as the reason “the demands of professional writing” (Ormrod, 102). The intensive, extended period of psychical research had served an additional purpose in enabling her to make the transition to full-time writer of prose fiction. When Hall fell seriously ill in the 1940s, both agreed that, should she and Troubridge predecease the other, the remaining partner would not attempt communication through a medium (Ormrod, 273).

Already before the trial, the pair distanced themselves from the metaphysical doctrines that Lodge had attached to psychical research. After he visited them in July 1919, for example, Troubridge wrote: “He seems weak & odd in his head I think, . . . & rabid against all scientific criticism of spiritism—alas—we very distressed [*sic*]” (Baker, 117). If Hall rejected Lodge’s new religion, however, she adapted important aspects of it to her emerging view of her own future as a writer. At the end of one sitting, a control said to Lodge: “Your heart’s been bleeding. You never thought you could love so deep. There must be more or less suffering. Even though you are crucified, you will arise the stronger, bigger, better man. But out of this suffering and crucifixion, oh, how you are going to help humanity! This is a big work. It has been prophesied. It is through the sufferings of humanity that humanity is reached. It must be through pain” (Lodge, 177). The control continues by emphasizing the evangelical character of the work

entrusted to Lodge and by assuring him that the salvation that his suffering will win for humanity is of the same sort as that which Christ preached. In the meantime, *Raymond* will bring joy to many (Lodge, 178).

As commodities, books are public. But they are usually written and read in private. Crucifixion is a form of homicide in which what is personal and private acquires its significance through and as public spectacle. In both instances, to use Roland Barthes's phrase, "the publicity of the private" comes into existence as "a new social value."⁴³ From *Raymond*, Hall derived a pattern that she adapted to her own writing and to her persona as author. Although highly critical of traditional Christian beliefs, Lodge's Spiritualism conserved the idea of Christ's crucifixion by referring it to Lodge himself and the gospel of psychical research. Likewise, Hall, even before beginning to publish as a writer of fiction, saw herself as a Christlike, sacrificial figure. In terms of gender, she was attracted both to the masculinist temper of the passage cited above as well as to the androgynous character of conventional representations of Christ. The ground of her evangel, however, would be found in the female same-sex desire that motivated her turn to Spiritualism in the first place. The sacrificial ideal was not a new one in homosexual apology of the late Victorian and early modernist periods. But no one else would pose the view as provocatively, and no one else would focus the assertion on desire between women.