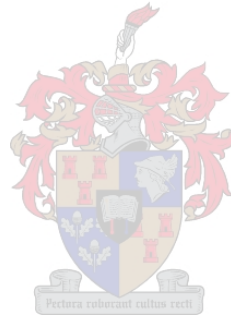


**Love Between The Lines: Paradigmatic Readings of the Relationship between Dora  
Carrington and Lytton Strachey**

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## **Declaration**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted at any university for a degree.

Signature:

Date:

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## **Abstract**

This thesis focuses on the relationship between Dora Carrington and Lytton Strachey and offers three models for reading their unconventional relationship. Carrington was in love with the homosexual Strachey and the two lived together at Tidmarsh, and later Ham Spray House, for more than fourteen years. The three models make extensive use of primary sources, namely the letters and diaries of Carrington and Strachey. Furthermore, I draw on two seminal biographies of Carrington and Strachey written by Gretchen Gerzina and Michael Holroyd respectively.

The first model I examine is a form of pederasty. I argue that, soon after they met, Carrington and Strachey began a friendship which was based on his educating her in a variety of ways. He served as a mentor both intellectually and sexually. Strachey was familiar with the concept of pederasty as a result of his involvement with the Cambridge Conversazione Society, better known as the Apostles, and used his knowledge to induct a rather naïve Carrington into new ways of thinking. This pederastic relationship also allowed Carrington a certain amount of freedom as it enabled her to pursue her art without the demands a heterosexual male would make of her.

The second model for reading their relationship is that of parody. While Carrington and Strachey's relationship resembles a heteronormative relationship, it can, at times, be read as parodic. I argue that they both subvert heteronormativity in humorous ways as a means to critique their parents' Victorian marriages and to interrogate notions of masculinity

and femininity. I discuss the roles they played within their domestic environment, and pay particular attention to how this intersected with Carrington's artistic endeavours. This parodying of heteronormativity was, I suggest, also one of the only ways they could find of expressing the love they felt for one another.

The last model I offer draws on theories of kinship. I examine how Carrington and Strachey resorted to familial constructions of descent as a means to veil the love they had for one another and to avoid criticism and ridicule from the Bloomsbury group and beyond. When they established a home at Tidmarsh, they altered their form of kinship to utilise principles of alliance. However, another shift took place with the introduction of Ralph Partridge, Carrington's husband, and I argue that the terms they used to address each other changed to constructions, once again, of descent, at least until the dissolution of the Carrington-Partridge marriage.

Carrington and Strachey's relationship is often viewed as unconventional and she is often depicted as being utterly subservient towards him. However, the three models I have used demonstrate that their love was mutual. The models also reveal their relationship to be quite conventional in the manner in which Carrington and Strachey expressed their love for one another and how these expressions of love developed during the different phases of the life they spent together.

## Opsomming

Hierdie tesis fokus op die verhouding tussen Dora Carrington en Lytton Strachey en stel drie verskillende modelle voor ter vertolking van hul onkonvensionele verhouding. Carrington was verlief op die homoseksuele Strachey en het vir meer as veertien jaar saam met hom gewoon, eers op Tidmarsh en later op Ham Spray. Al drie interpretatiewe modelle is gegrond op die briewe en dagboeke van Carrington en Strachey. Daarbenewens maak ek maak breedvoerig gebruik van twee gesaghebbende biografieë, onderskeidelik deur Gretchen Gerzina en Michael Holroyd.

Pederastie is die eerste model wat ek ondersoek. Ek voer aan dat kort na hulle eerste ontmoeting, 'n ongewone vriendskap tussen Carrington en Strachey ontwikkel het, waarvolgens Strachey die rol van intellektuele en seksuele mentor teenoor die jonger Carrington aangeneem het. Strachey was vertrouwd met die model van pederastie vanweë sy betrokkenheid by die Cambridge Conversazione Society, ook bekend as die 'Apostles', en het hierdie kennis gebruik om die betreklik naïewe Carrington bloot te stel aan nuwe denkrigtings.

Die *ooglopend* heteronormatiewe karakter van hierdie verhouding bring egter ook 'n tweede model na vore, naamlik parodie. Enersyds sou 'n mens kon argumenteer dat Carrington en Strachey die basiese raamwerk van hul ouers se Victoriaanse huwelike implementeer het ten einde die ideologiese konstruksie van manlike en vroulike identiteite aan kritiek te onderwerp. Gevolglik bespreek ek die rolle wat hulle binne die

tuiste vertolk het, en ondersoek die impak hiervan op Carrington se kreatiewe lewe. Andersyds het hierdie parodiëring van heteronormatiewiteit hulle die geleentheid verskaf om hul liefde vir mekaar kon uitleef.

Laastens ondersoek ek—aan die hand van teorieë van verwantskap—hoe Carrington en Strachey hulle gewend het tot familiële verwantskaps-konstruksies ten einde hul liefde vir mekaar te verbloem, en sodoende kritiek en bespotting van onder andere die Bloomsbury groep te vermy. Met hul vestiging in Tidmarsh het hulle hul verwantskap reconstrueer om ook die beginsels van bondgenootskap te betrek. Hierdie raamwerk is egter opgehef toe Ralph Partridge, Carrington se man, op die toneel verskyn het, en ek voer aan dat hierdie situasie, in die geval van Carrington en Strachey, familiële verwantskaps-konstruksies herroep het, tot en met die uiteindelijke verbokkeling van Carrington en Partridge se huwelik.

Carrington en Strachey se verhouding word dikwels as onkonvensioneel beskou; daarbenewens word sy gereeld uitgebeeld as onderdanig aan hom. Die drie modelle in terme waarvan ek hulle verhouding interpreteer dui egter daarop dat hulle liefde wedersyds was. Die modelle suggereer ook dat hulle verhouding op 'n relatief konvensionele wyse uitgedruk is, en demonstreer hoe hierdie uitdrukking ontwikkel het gedurende die verskillende fases van hulle gemeenskaplike lewe.



## **Contents**

Chapter 1: An Introduction to Uncommon Lives	1
Chapter 2: Playing with Pederasty	22
Chapter 3: Parodic Reinventions	58
Chapter 4: Constructions of Kinship	98
Conclusion	147
Bibliography	155

I wish there was something between love and friendship  
that I could tender him; and some gesture, not quite a  
caress, I could give him. A sort of smoothing.<sup>1</sup>

“When *our* lives come to be written,” he observed, “they’ll  
be even more peculiar than the Victorians.”<sup>2</sup>

We can both sing it: if thou’lt bear a part, thou  
shalt hear; ’tis in three parts.<sup>3</sup>

He first deceased, she for a little tried  
To live without him, liked it not and died.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Louise Bogan, (qtd. in Whitney 117).

<sup>2</sup> A letter from Lytton Strachey to Carrington (qtd. in Holroyd 480).

<sup>3</sup> The character of Mopsa in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* (4.4.2177-4.4.2178).

<sup>4</sup> This poem, “Upon the death of Sir Albert Morton’s Wife” by Sir Henry Wotton, was copied into Carrington’s diary.

## Chapter 1: An Introduction to Uncommon Lives<sup>5</sup>

Michael Holroyd, in the preface to his biography of Lytton Strachey, claims that Bloomsbury believed in “a great deal of a great many different kinds of love” (xxxiii).<sup>6</sup> The relationship between Dora Carrington (1893 – 1932) and Strachey (1880 – 1932) is symptomatic of that belief and this thesis aims to interrogate their rather unconventional relationship by providing three different paradigms within which to read the relationship between them, namely pederasty, parody and familial (re)constructions.

Strachey was a biographer and critic, best known for his work *Eminent Victorians*, while Carrington was an artist who painted mainly for pleasure and rarely exhibited. She was also a commissioned artist for the Omega Workshop,<sup>7</sup> which was founded by Roger Fry<sup>8</sup> and Duncan Grant.<sup>9</sup> However, she is chiefly remembered for her relationship with Strachey and it is in this role that she has gained recognition. Strachey was openly gay during the post-Victorian bohemian period (1900 – 1939), yet was attracted to Carrington soon after meeting her. He tried to embrace and kiss her. Notwithstanding the fact that

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<sup>5</sup> The title is taken from Catherine Whitney’s book *Uncommon Lives: Gay Men and Straight Women*.

<sup>6</sup> Strachey initially wrote this phrase in a letter to Carrington on 23 March 1917 and this is clearly the origin of Holroyd’s words.

<sup>7</sup> The Omega Workshop was founded in July 1913 at 33 Fitzroy Square and its aim was to promote decorative art. “Whole rooms, and all the objects within them, became their canvasses as they turned their brushes to textiles, dishes, screens, furniture and walls” (Gerzina 68).

<sup>8</sup> Fry was a member of the Cambridge Apostle Society and organised the Post-Impressionist Exhibitions of 1910 and 1912.

<sup>9</sup> Grant was a cousin of Strachey, and lived with Vanessa Bell at their country home, Charleston, in Sussex. He also fathered a daughter, Angelica, with Bell. Angelica eventually married Grant’s lover, David (or Bunny) Garnett.

Strachey was a “H-O-M-O-S-E-X-U-A-L” (Holroyd 353),<sup>10</sup> Carrington fell in love with Strachey, and despite having sexual affairs with other men and later even marrying Ralph Partridge, she was devoted to him.

Initially she and Strachey lived together at the Mill House in Tidmarsh, Berkshire (at Strachey’s suggestion), with Ralph Partridge joining them after his marriage to Carrington on 21 May 1921. During this time Strachey was in love with Partridge, as I demonstrate in the final chapter. The three of them lived together, but relations were often volatile, particularly when Partridge discovered Carrington’s affair with his friend Gerald Brenan. In 1924 the trio moved into Ham Spray House, Wiltshire, which had been purchased by Strachey. While the house drew the three together once again, it is clear that the Partridge marriage had practically dissolved as both parties were having extra-marital affairs; while their lives were linked, their marriage had “entered a friendly state of not being married while being married” (Gerzina 202). This freedom allowed Partridge to have another affair with Frances Marshall, whom he eventually married after Carrington’s suicide following Strachey’s death. Carrington and Strachey had numerous relationships, she with both men and women, yet neither Carrington nor Strachey ever formed a bond which displaced their love for each other, as their respective biographers, Gretchen Gerzina and Michael Holroyd, have been at pains to point out.

Dora Carrington has been mentioned in several books of a biographical nature, yet in most of them she has merited only a mention, usually in relation to Lytton Strachey and

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<sup>10</sup> Holroyd chooses to write the word like this, indicative of Hiles spelling out the term to Carrington, who apparently was not familiar with the concept.

their unconventional relationship. Such accounts include: *Love in Bloomsbury: Memories* by Frances Partridge, *Great Friends* by David Garnett, *Mark Gertler: Biography of a Painter* by John Woodeson, *Mark Gertler: Selected Letters* edited by Noel Carrington, *Bloomsbury Portraits: Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and Their Circle* by Richard Shone, *Letters of Virginia Woolf* edited by Nigel Nicolson, *Diary of Virginia Woolf* edited by Anne Olivier Bell, *Best of Friends: the Brenan-Partridge Letters* edited by Xan Fielding and *Personal Record* by Gerald Brenan. She has found her way into many other accounts of Bloomsbury, yet she was always on the margins of this group. She is also the subject of *Carrington: Paintings, Drawings and Decorations* by her brother, Noel Carrington, and *Carrington: Letters and Extracts from Her Diaries* edited by David Garnett. Holroyd, in his definitive biography of Lytton Strachey, charts the development of their relationship and gives an account of their demise. This biography is also used as the basis for Christopher Hampton's 1995 film which, despite drawing primarily from a biography entitled *Lytton Strachey*, is called *Carrington*. This re-titling indicates that there is an enthrallment with Carrington, and this preoccupation with her life and work could be seen as subversive of Strachey's predominant fame in showing Carrington's life as being equally, if not more, fascinating, than his.

References to Carrington in biographical anecdotes concerning other members of Bloomsbury are suggestive of her significance in terms of her influence, her artistic talents, but also of her physical presence. They are also indicative of her relegation to the fringes of Bloomsbury society. David Garnett claims in the preface to his collection of Carrington's letters and diary entries:

Carrington was more at home in the world of Augustus John, Henry Lamb and the painters trained like her at the Slade School of Art than with the Bloomsbury painters like Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and Roger Fry, who looked across the channel and were influenced by Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso. Carrington's painting remained insular. (11)

He acknowledges that Carrington was more at home with those who shared her artistic experiences, and uses this reasoning to note that she “did not quite fit into [the Bloomsbury] group and entered it more as an appendage of Lytton Strachey's than in her own right” (11). He does not seem to realise, I think, that Carrington made a conscious decision not to submerge herself in Bloomsbury – she would not aspire to be Strachey's “appendage” and I don't imagine Strachey viewing her as such either. She was confident in her training at the Slade and resisted conforming to the ideals of Bell, Grant and Fry, yet was often quite wounded by their criticism, as I demonstrate in Chapter 3.

However, her life clearly warranted a biography; *Carrington: a Life*, by Gretchen Gerzina, is seen as the most definitive and complete biography. This thesis partly focuses on Gerzina's biography of Carrington and will examine how Gerzina not only constructs her subject, but also how she accounts for Carrington's life as “a series of unresolved, opposing tensions” (xiv), especially with regard to her relationship with Strachey. Gerzina draws mainly from letters and diary extracts; these primary sources are invaluable given their first-person narrative authority. Reading letters between Carrington

and Strachey, as well as those to other friends, might hopefully allow for both insider and outsider perspectives on their characters and their relationship.<sup>11</sup>

Examining their letters, diaries and biographies together provides me with sources that reveal both differences and commonalities in how Carrington and Strachey consciously fashion their own identities within their diaries, how they represent themselves and their relationship to each other and various friends within letters, and how biographers such as Gerzina and Holroyd have chosen to represent them, essentially as constructed characters. Robert Elbaz (155) claims that the self or identity is the exclusive property of its owner and to a certain extent I agree with him – self-fashioning is an autonomous process, but it is necessarily created in response to a social, political and cultural context and it is these contexts, particularly the social, which inform the love between Carrington and Strachey.

In exploring these concepts of self-fashioning, the thesis offers three models as a means to read the relationship. In using these models of pederasty, parody and kinship to deconstruct such a complex relationship between two, and eventually three, individuals, we see that it is perhaps not as unconventional as we might first imagine. Pederasty, parody and kinship offer the reader ways to examine the love between Carrington and Strachey, but they also allow for permutations of a love which could be examined as a critical response to heteronormative institutions such as marriage and the family, as well as the social restrictions placed on them, especially those of class and gender.

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<sup>11</sup> Carrington and Strachey's letters will reveal insider perspectives, while Gerzina and Holroyd, and to a lesser extent, Garnett and Levy, will reveal outsiders' perspectives.

The first chapter looks at the model of pederasty and will explore the beginning stages of the relationship between Carrington and Strachey before they moved into the Mill House in Tidmarsh together. In particular, I examine their meeting one another and the early letters which passed between the two of them, and I contend that Strachey takes on the role of the *erastes* and Carrington the role of the *eromenos* within the relationship. He served as her mentor, teaching her literature and history, and initiating a sexual awareness which she had, up until this point, denied herself. Because Carrington loved him and at times deplored her body and her femininity, she styled herself as being quite masculine in an attempt, I argue, to become an object of his desire. I begin by focussing on how the tenets of the Cambridge Apostle Society affected them. The Apostles embraced Platonic love, and Strachey in particular advocated the “pursuit of the ‘greatest good’ of male friendship [as opposed] to the company of women” (Taddeo 9). I argue that one of the ways in which Strachey reconciles his relationship with Carrington to his Apostolic beliefs is by engaging in an unusual form of pederasty. This mutual negotiation between them suited Carrington, as it endorsed the love she felt for him, but also enabled her to “justifiably” disregard her femininity and provided her with a means to disguise her insecurities regarding her education and sexuality.

In particular I will examine how Gerzina and Holroyd depict Carrington’s ideas of femininity and masculinity. According to Gerzina, Carrington, “[b]ecause of her Bohemian lifestyle, connection with the Bloomsbury group, short hair, and rejection of many traditional women’s roles [...] seemed to symbolise the ‘new’ and ‘modern’ woman of the twentieth century” (xiv). While the biographer acknowledges Carrington’s



“rejection of [...] traditional women’s roles,” she does not really account for this by examining in any great detail Carrington’s attitudes to these roles. Much is said about Carrington’s aversion towards sex (Gerzina 11, 52-52; Holroyd 353-354), especially in terms of her relationship with Mark Gertler, whom she was courting at the time of her first meeting with Strachey. This sexual repression is partly ascribed to the influence of her mother, whom Carrington felt oppressed her father, and partly to her being “very much the product of a late-Victorian upbringing” (Gerzina 39). But Carrington herself seemed ambivalent when it came to her womanhood.

While Gerzina mentions the instances in which Carrington’s ambivalence about her femininity is clear, she seems to make little attempt to account for this. This research hopes to do that by examining Carrington’s sexuality as represented in, among other sources, her letters to Strachey and other friends. Gerzina recounts many instances in which it is clear that Carrington is almost repulsed by her body. According to her, Carrington despised her female body, particularly the confinement of menstruation (11). She wrote from Tidmarsh: “I am so sorry Lytton, I’ve got my fiend of blackness on me, so I don’t feel very energetic for anything, but indoor pursuits” (12 March 1921), and she signals this frustration in many more letters which I draw on in Chapter 3.

I would suggest from this account to Strachey that, while Carrington may have despised women’s bodies, it was more a case of her despising the accompanying conventions of womanhood. Her frustrations with what conventional notions of womanhood at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century entailed is clear, and it is perhaps this contempt which

results in her breaking away from the norm; such resistance ranged from cutting her hair short and wearing breeches to living with a gay man and having an abortion. All of these actions are deliberately defiant and will be considered in the light of Butler's theory of gender as performative, where acts such as cutting one's hair short and adopting a masculine role are consciously performed and create an internal gender identity. This theory will also be explored in the next chapter, where I discuss how Carrington's and Strachey's gender identities were fluidly constructed and appear complementary in that they met each other's needs.

The third chapter deals with their relationship once they took up residence at the Mill House in Tidmarsh and examines the roles they inhabited with regard to domesticity. Bloomsbury and its accompanying sexual/political/religious/artistic philosophies, I argue, influenced many of their decisions. The chapter will also examine in greater detail how the relationship functioned by looking at representations of their gender identities and the apparent attempts to transgress orthodoxy. I argue that in many aspects Carrington and Strachey, aware of the unconventionality of their association, often style their relationship as heteronormative in the division of labour at Tidmarsh, and later at Ham Spray. At other times, however, they playfully parody these heteronormative behaviours within their relationship, often in a self-deprecating manner.

Carrington and Strachey lived together for almost fifteen years and, in both of their homes, he fulfilled the more traditional role of being the breadwinner and meeting material needs. He provided her with material comfort as she was "painfully poor" and,

even after her marriage to Ralph Partridge, she was “still in financial difficulties” (Nicholson 24). Carrington, on the other hand, fulfilled the stereotypical feminine role and at Tidmarsh “most of the waiting seemed to be done by [her]” (Woolf, *Diary: Vol. 1* 171). She was also the woman responsible for making both their homes, particularly the Mill House, habitable. She turned them into beautiful domestic spaces by painting, decorating and furnishing them even before Strachey moved in. At times their relationship appears to replicate a marriage, and their consciousness of this irony results in a parodic dimension of heteronormativity which leads to many humorous interactions between them, which I discuss later in the thesis.

In discussing dimensions of heteronormativity, my conjecture is that Carrington would have benefited from a male presence, one who could possibly protect her, provide for her, and fulfil functions expected of a man in a conformist romantic relationship; but at the same time a homosexual man would make few of the demands often placed on women at the time, such as performing sexual, maternal and domestic functions. Gerzina outlines three reasons why Carrington did not want to get married:

[S]he was extremely jealous of her independence and privacy [...] her life with Strachey had been well nigh perfect [...] and [t]he final, and perhaps most important, reason for resisting marriage was her art [...] [Carrington] knew of no woman artist who successfully managed motherhood and her career. (Gerzina 162-163)

While these claims will be further investigated in a later section, it seems likely that a multifaceted relationship like that between Carrington and Strachey left a woman like her with a certain amount of freedom to pursue her career as an artist, a career which Strachey fully supported.

Representations of Carrington in biographical works on figures of her time reveal that she was artistically exceptionally talented, but often seemingly lacked the conviction and the means to pursue this talent, and one has to wonder what exactly Strachey's role was with respect to her personal life and the pursuit of her passion for painting. "[F]eminist critics either see Strachey as the champion of strong women or condemn him as the patriarchal misogynist who dominated Dora Carrington and envied the success of Virginia Woolf" (Taddeo 2). My interpretation of their relationship is, I believe, slightly more pragmatic, in that Strachey certainly was patriarchal, partly because of his upbringing and partly as a result of his economic success after the critical acclaim for *Eminent Victorians*. While I'm sure he did envy Woolf's success, he was extremely supportive of Carrington's artistic endeavours by providing her with domestic and financial security, as I demonstrate in this chapter. I would fully concur with Paul Levy when he claims that "[Strachey] did not, as many feminist writers on Bloomsbury claim, discourage Carrington from practising her art. Far from it, he took every opportunity to urge her to paint – and especially to exhibit" (xiii). Strachey went to great lengths to support her, even building her a studio, and constantly enquired about her painting and was quite proud of her work. Carrington, while having been exposed to Bloomsbury, was not a part of it; yet living with Strachey granted her exposure to this rather elite clique, which by

and large appreciated her artistic talents and afforded her successful opportunities as a painter. Virginia Woolf in particular supported her art (Holroyd 449-450).

While Strachey did encourage Carrington artistically, he was quite patriarchal in his attitude to her. Even though he supported her, he naturally still valued and wished to maintain the life Carrington and he had created in which she prioritised his comfort, and this in turn hints at Strachey's dependence on Carrington. Neither Gerzina nor Holroyd seems to examine this facet of their relationship. Why would he allow himself to be sheltered by her, even taking the historical context into account? This stands in stark contrast to his audacious and candid position as a member of Cambridge's Apostle Society, which critiqued the inflexibility and rigidity of the Victorian generation and asserted their own notions of sexual behaviour (Taddeo 15). Does Strachey then use Carrington as a smokescreen, preventing himself from fully asserting a homosexual identity in a world removed from Cambridge? Strachey benefited from having found an intellectual consort who lavished him with love. He taught Carrington the French classics and often challenged her beliefs. She fulfilled Strachey's desire for aesthetics, both in and outside of the home. He respected her as an artist, a professional, often posing for her, but also found her alluring. This is not to suggest that Carrington was beautiful; yet Strachey must have been attracted to her in some way to kiss her at their first meeting.

Strachey's attraction to Carrington, perhaps in part because of her boyishness, lends itself to the notion of gender as performative, and this is used when examining the interplay between Carrington's feminine identity and Strachey's homosexuality within the

domestic sphere of Tidmarsh. By looking at biographical representations, the research will attempt to examine questions such as: how is Carrington's identity fashioned in terms of her relationship to Strachey? What constitutes the relationship? Does she construct a role for herself which could be seen as traditionally or stereotypically assigned to the female? How do they (Carrington and Strachey) account for their alternative relationship regarding devotion, intimacy, sex, domesticity, loyalty, faithfulness, friendship and marriage? Can a relationship like Carrington and Strachey's be viewed as a coup for her? By performing the defiant acts she does, is she not breaking away from conventionality and asserting herself as an independent woman? Perhaps we can interpret these acts of defiance as Carrington aligning herself with the turn of the century sexual politics. This seems unlikely, according to Gerzina, who claims that Carrington had little involvement with politics at all; "the battle for women's suffrage which occasioned so much publicity through Mrs Pankhurst and others during those years seems to have affected [Carrington] little" (74). My hypothesis is that Carrington and Strachey were, to a large extent, critiquing the Victorian marriages of their time and were to a certain extent breaking the mould, but they were also in all likelihood creating an environment which was tolerant of a love that existed between a gay man and a bisexual woman. These are labels which I am reluctant to use though, as it would seem to me that Carrington and Strachey are continually creating fluid gender identities which allow for "one of the strangest, and most touching, love stories ever. For it was a love affair" (Levy xiii).

This love affair became more complex with the introduction of Partridge and Chapter 4 deals with the changing dynamics between Carrington and Strachey, which were the result of Partridge spending most weekends with the two of them at Tidmarsh, and later, with his marriage to her. This resulted in an unsatisfying ménage a trois:<sup>12</sup> Carrington in love with Strachey, Strachey in love with Partridge, and Partridge in love with Carrington. In this final chapter I suggest that Carrington and Strachey rely on familial constructions throughout their relationship in an attempt to shield themselves from the oddness of their association. Significantly, as readers we see that the terms they use to address each other evolve as their relationship shifts and transmutes from their initial flirtations to their domestic “marriage”, and then again, with the induction of Partridge into Tidmarsh.

Gerzina suggests that Carrington used Strachey as a barrier to avoid Partridge’s growing need for intimacy, but I expand on this idea and suggest that Partridge was a disruptive influence in their lives and a threat to their “family”. Carrington and Strachey satisfied all each other’s wants and needs, aside from the sexual, and for this reason Carrington exaggerates her sexual relationship with Partridge when writing to Strachey, possibly as a means to reassure him that she was not wholly dependent on him. However, she grew very fond of Partridge, as did Strachey, and the three of them became involved in what was not a ménage à trios in the conventional sense of the term where sex is the constitutive dimension; it was a more complex union between three people.

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<sup>12</sup> This is itself a contested term for this tripartite relationship which I discuss in more detail in the final chapter.

I use models of kinship to read their tripartite relationships and trace the changes that took place as these altered. Initially Carrington and Strachey use terms of endearment which rely on principles of descent when they refer to each other as grandfather-grandchild or uncle-niece, but once they move in together they begin to invoke ideas of alliance. It is clear that their lives were interlinked and lived in communion with one another in a stable domestic space. It is during this period that the majority of references to their “married state” are made and they resort to referring to themselves as having made a conscious choice to be with one another. Unfortunately, many within Bloomsbury and beyond saw the attachment as eccentric (Gerzina xviii) and it is perhaps for this reason that they veil themselves in familial, more specifically matrimonial, discourse.

Once Carrington accepted Partridge as a lover, a distance is created between herself and Strachey as she begins to refer to him as a patriarchal figure. He in turn refers to her and Partridge as his children and in a number of ways begins to treat them as such. Often he found himself playing the role of the mediator or counsellor as both “children” sought him out for advice. The recourse to the terminology of father figure and children is, I argue, an attempt to “normalise” the threesome and to make sense of their unusual bond. The triangulation of these three lives, though, meant that they became dependent on one another, and Carrington was partly manipulated into her marriage with Partridge and it was possibly a feeling of resentment on the part of both Carrington and Partridge that led



to the quick dissolution of the marriage.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, it was not only the dissolution of the marriage, but on a much more muted level, the dissolution of the “family”.

In my discussion of these three models Bloomsbury provides the milieu; this rather subversive group of friends, whom Garnett labelled a group of “free-thinking heretics” (*Letters* 10), challenged the establishment’s notions of art, literature, culture, politics and heteronormativity, and were particularly outspoken about the War. They occupied a liminal and, at times, paradoxical space which provided for the exploration and practice of such alternative relationships as that between Carrington and Strachey, and I discuss this, at times, hypocritical nature of Bloomsbury and how they viewed unconventional relationships in Chapter 4.

According to Dmitri Mirsky, Bloomsbury was part of the British *intelligentsia*, which dubbed itself *highbrow* (in Rosenbaum 383) and “gave priority to civilized private values over the vulgar ambitions of public life and believed that the good life was made up of aesthetic sensibility and personal relationships” (Hugh Lee, *Cézanne* 7). Quentin Bell, however, lacks Mirsky’s confidence about what Bloomsbury represents; he admits that, even as an insider, the idea of what Bloomsbury believed in is impossible to articulate or define with any certainty. Yet he implies that there were many “personal relationships” which were undoubtedly informed by the “aesthetic sensibility”. He also states that his book *Bloomsbury* is not intended to divulge the bedroom secrets and scandals of a period which witnessed a backlash against Victorian values and the woes of World War I. Bell

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<sup>13</sup> Partridge related a conversation to Carrington that had allegedly occurred between himself and Strachey, in which he claimed Strachey did not want Carrington to be dependent on him and wished her to get married. Partridge in a sense capitalised on Carrington’s fears in order to persuade her to get married.

explains that he is not inclined to “sniff into commodes or under beds, to open love-letters or to scrutinise diaries” (*Bloomsbury* 9), yet it is these love-letters and diaries which provide us with illuminating, albeit subjective accounts.

Carrington’s and Strachey’s letters are extensively examined in this thesis.<sup>14</sup> I have used them as my primary sources and on a number of occasions quote them at length, because I feel they give the greatest amount of insight into the relationship as a whole, and they are invaluable in what they reveal about the day-to-day habitual behaviour of Carrington’s and Strachey’s life together and how it changed and evolved over time. Moreover, I find it invaluable to have the voices of Carrington and Strachey permeate this thesis, because as much as I am interrogating their relationship, it is a relationship between two individuals who had marked differences in terms of sex, gender, sexual orientation, class and education; these differences are often evident in their respective letters. Carrington in particular often made conscious decisions in how to represent herself; in the case of writing to Gerald Brenan she “struggled at first to find the correct approach to take in writing to him, for each [correspondent] required a different tone” (Gerzina 152).

Because I would like to preserve the authenticity of these letters, I have, where relevant, quoted them verbatim and have not corrected them. Carrington’s letters in particular are rather idiosyncratic – often she randomly capitalised letters and would regularly leave out words. On a very practical level I have also chosen to do this to avoid resorting to over-

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<sup>14</sup> In June-July 2006 I was fortunate enough to have access to all the letters between them which are archived at the British Library and amount to eight volumes, as well as Carrington’s diary. Where I have quoted from these letters and the diary I have provided the date as a point of reference.

use of “sic”. When I have quoted letters from the edited collections of her and Strachey’s letters, I have not edited them further and quote them verbatim, even when they included errors.

The research entailed extensive use of Gerzina’s biography of Carrington and Holroyd’s biography of Strachey, as well as Hampton’s film biopic. Other sources, such as Virginia Woolf’s letters and diaries, will be used where necessary, and it is these letters and diaries, while peripheral, which offer an engaging insight into the social context of Carrington and Strachey’s liaison; they represent a social context which moulds the identities the two chose for themselves. I suggest that Woolf’s opinions are fairly representative of how the rest of Bloomsbury viewed this alternative relationship and would like to examine Woolf’s feelings towards Carrington as well as her opinion on the relationship between Carrington and Strachey.

In March 1918 Virginia Woolf initially describes Carrington as “apple red & firm in the cheeks, bright green & yellow in the body, & immensely firm & large all over” (Woolf, *Diary: Vol. 1* 128). Woolf does not seem particularly fond of Carrington, who was initially vilified for the effect she had on Lytton Strachey; subsequently she was praised for the very same effect. In June of the same year Woolf “wonder[s] sometimes what she’s at: so eager to please, conciliatory, restless & active. I suppose the tug of Lytton’s influence deranges her spiritual balance a good deal. She has still an immense strange admiration for him & us. How far it is discriminating I don’t know.” In the same diary

entry she contends, though, that Carrington is so “red & solid, & at the same time inquisitive, that one can’t help liking her” (Woolf, *Diary: Vol. 1* 153).

Woolf seems to be continually plagued by Carrington’s ruddiness, and in reading her physical descriptions of Carrington, one detects more than a hint of jealousy. In fact, by her continual focus on it, she seems almost resentful of Carrington’s good health. In contrast, and quite ironically when one considers Woolf’s own mental lapses, she seems to think that Carrington has a less than solid “spiritual balance” which is prone to “derange[ment]”. The very fact that Woolf pinpoints this susceptibility as the result of “the tug of Lytton’s influence” shows that she discounts Carrington’s independence of thought and portrays her as rather whimsical. This whimsy merits investigation. It is also clear that Woolf feels that Strachey possessed a great deal of power over Carrington and Woolf’s account of her leaves the impression that Carrington is unquestioningly submissive to Strachey’s influence. This is no doubt one of the contributing factors which leaves us with the perception of Carrington as being entirely subservient to Strachey, a notion which Gerzina challenges, but at times also seems to entrench, as I will demonstrate.

Someone in Woolf’s position would interpret Carrington and Strachey’s intimacy primarily via *his* depiction of the relationship, and Woolf, being one of Strachey’s closest confidantes, knew of his insecurity and uncertainty about his relationship with Carrington.<sup>15</sup> In the following exchange Woolf seems not only to pounce on Strachey’s

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<sup>15</sup> Woolf’s perspective on the relationship between Carrington and Strachey is discussed in Chapter 4 (131-139).

insecurities about the relationship, but also suggests that she and Lady Ottoline Morrell,<sup>16</sup> and surely others, had discussed the Carrington-Strachey union. Woolf quite tellingly teases Strachey, capitalising on his doubts, and recorded the following conversation in her diary:

“That woman will dog me” – he remarked. “She won’t let me write, I daresay.”

“Ottoline was saying you would end by marrying her.”

“God! the mere notion is enough – One thing I know – I’ll never marry anyone –”

“But if she’s in love with you?”

“Well, then she must take her chance.”

“I believe I’m sometimes jealous – ”

“Of her? that’s inconceivable – ”

“You like me better, don’t you?”

He said he did; we laughed; remarked on our wish for an intimate correspondent; but how to overcome the difficulties?

(Woolf, *Diary: Vol. 1* 89)

While Woolf speaks in a familiar and teasing tone, she makes her jealousy clear and it seems that, on the one hand, she rather doggedly pursues personal validation from Strachey, but on the other, she is intent on determining how Strachey views his own position with respect to Carrington. She is surely trying to determine Carrington’s

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<sup>16</sup> Lady Ottoline Morrell, the wife of the prominent MP, Philip Morrell, had an affair with Bertrand Russell, another member of the Cambridge Apostle Society. She frequently entertained artists and writers (often poor), providing them with a respite from the demands of life in London.

intentions as well, of which she seems suspicious, wondering “what she’s at”. This wariness on Woolf’s part is echoed in her statement that “one can’t help liking her”. If one accepts Woolf’s jealousy, the fact that her almost begrudging admission of liking Carrington is syntactically juxtaposed with yet another unflattering description of Carrington’s rather boorish and unrefined solidity makes it clear that Woolf’s, and perhaps by extension Bloomsbury’s, relationship with Carrington was a tenuous one.

Throughout her biography of Carrington, Gerzina traces this rather fraught relationship between Bloomsbury, the centre of urban avant-garde British culture, and the rural domesticity in which Carrington and Strachey submersed themselves at Tidmarsh. These two spatial realms had very different impacts on how both Carrington and Strachey chose to fashion their identities. Indeed, Carrington loved the country, particularly later in life as she was always away from the gossip of Bloomsbury, and in a sense had Strachey to herself. He, on the other hand, while loving life at Tidmarsh and Ham Spray, enjoyed London life. This was just one of many opposing tensions which existed in their lives together, and the three models I am going to propose are ways of trying to explore these tensions, their lives and the love they felt for one another.

One of the pervasive tensions in writing this thesis has been that between writing a biographical account of the lives of Carrington and Strachey and simultaneously exploring the three paradigms which I use to read their relationship. I have tried to construct a narrative with the biographical information where possible, and in many instances I have quoted from the two principal biographers as well as the letters to

illustrate events. Two significant events which are mentioned in all chapters are the trip to Bath, where Carrington and Strachey consummated their relationship, as well as the negotiations and preparations surrounding their decision to move into Tidmarsh. Both these moments serve as pivotal points in their lives and alter the manner in which their association can be read. I will elaborate on these moments, and other key biographical events when discussing the three models.

The thesis offers alternative insights into the relationship of Carrington and Strachey, and in doing so, I hope to foreground the mutual love they felt for one another. Their relationship was not socially sanctioned, and for this reason I use models of pederasty, parody and kinship to read the unconventional life they shared.

## Chapter 2: Playing with Pederasty

Dora Carrington and Lytton Strachey met each other towards the end of 1915 at Virginia Woolf's Asheham home. Carrington was a 22-year old painter, living in London, when she made what her biographer calls her "'formal' entry" into Bloomsbury (Gerzina 69). Strachey was a 35-year old writer working on biographies for his *Eminent Victorians*. She was a virgin and he homosexual; yet the two of them embarked on a relationship which lasted until their deaths in 1932. I argue that their relationship can be read as an unconventional form of pederasty. This chapter examines the beginning of their relationship, before they moved into Tidmarsh together and looks at how the credo of the Apostle Society at Cambridge influenced Strachey's ideas and, consequently, Carrington as well. Strachey had left Cambridge in 1905, because "[t]he wicked dons of Trinity have refused to make me a fellow" (qtd. in Holroyd 117). It was ten years later that he would meet Carrington, but the beliefs and practices of the Apostle Society were still foremost in Strachey's mind and, because of their influence, it is these principles that I use as a means of reading the relationship between Carrington and Strachey.

Strachey was elected to the Cambridge Conversazione Society in his third year at Trinity. The Society, better known as the Apostles, was a rather secretive group of students and alumni who met weekly to deliver essays which they had written. According to Merivale, it was an elite group, with members being head-hunted based on their "common intellectual taste, common studies, [and] common literary aspirations" (Holroyd 77).



Strachey's election took place on 1 February 1902 and was one of the defining moments in his life. In a letter to his mother, marked "Private and Confidential", he told her:

My dearest Mama – This is to say – before I am committed to oaths of secrecy – that I am now a brother of the Society of Apostles – How I dare write the words I don't know! – I was apparently elected yesterday, and today the news was gently broken. The members – past and present – are sufficiently distinguished. Tennyson was one of the early ones. But I shall know more when I visit the Ark – or closet in which the documents of the society are kept.<sup>17</sup> It is a veritable Brotherhood – the chief point being personal friendship between the members. The sensation is a strange one. Angels are Apostles who have taken wings – viz. settled down to definite opinions – which they may do whenever they choose. I feel I shall never take wings[.] (Holroyd 77)

Strachey's words were quite prophetic in that he never really did "take wings" as he initially struggled to settle down to "definite opinions" regarding homosexuality and his practices often wavered in exemplifying the ideologies of the Apostles, particularly when his relationship with Carrington is examined. Many Apostles would have treated his relationship with her as taboo as it was a contravention of the idealised homosexual relationships which they upheld.

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<sup>17</sup> It is ironic that Strachey had to enter the Ark to come out of the closet, but it was within the confines of the Society that he could begin to express his homosexual desires and find some form of, if not acceptance, at least tolerance.

The Apostle Society based its ideological belief system on the idea of Greek Love and relied heavily on Plato's *Symposium*, which advocated all-male love. In the *Symposium*, Pausanias draws the distinction between "higher" love and "lower" love. According to Louis Crompton, "higher" love "has an ideal, spiritual component and is directed only to young men who are beginning to develop beards and intellect" and this love combines the physical with the spiritual. In contrast, "lower" love is "purely physical and includes the desire for women as well as boys" (3-4).

One of the reasons the Edwardian Apostles in particular adopted this differentiation between "higher" and "lower" love was to create a homosocial environment in which they distanced themselves from the effeminate homosexual "queer", and it became a rationalisation of sexual and emotional ties between men of the same social background and provided a justification for men who desired other men. Julie Taddeo explains:

The phrase 'higher sodomy' itself deliberately signified the intellectual, physical, spiritual, and emotional superiority of the Apostolic man and further sanctioned the bonds of all-male friendships. This form of manly love did not encompass the dirty acts of 'buggers' who lurked in subway stations and dark alleys, nor did the Higher Sodomy include the even baser practices of the reputed womanizers at Oxford. Rather, the roots of the Higher Sodomy, Strachey and his Brothers asserted, extended to ancient Greece and emulated Plato's dualistic construct of love: the sacred non-physical male love far exceeded the profane bodily expression

of desire. Should ‘copulation – the act of beasts,’ occur, the Apostolic identity still preserved the dignity of the Brothers. After all, physical intimacy between intellectual and spiritual equals did not resemble the lust of ‘ordinary’ men. Ultimately, the Higher Sodomy promoted not a sexual agenda but a glorification of male friendship. (23)

This dissociation from “ordinary” men distanced the Apostles from the “effeminate aesthete who paid for sex with lower-class boys” (Taddeo 8), which was typified and publicised by the Wilde prosecution in 1895. Here was a man who contradicted the Victorian ideal of English manhood and it was this image from which the Apostles wished to distance themselves by evoking the idea of the Higher Sodomy. Instead, the Apostles focused on the “glorification of male friendship.” Noel Annan claims that Strachey, and by proxy the Apostles, tried to convert others; he identifies Strachey and his contemporaries as a “‘cult of homosexuals’ who engaged in a ‘self-conscious act of defiance against the Establishment’” (qtd. in Taddeo 16), while Paul Levy credits Strachey as single-handedly altering the “character of the Society [...] into overt, full-blooded – almost aggressive homosexuality” (qtd. in Taddeo 16). While the members of the Apostle Society may have been protesting against the Establishment, in effect they were advocating homosexuality in the sense of the Higher Sodomy as, with the Wilde trials, the public’s perception had conflated the idea of the intellectual aesthete and the effeminate aesthete.

The intellectual aesthete as typified by the Apostles fostered an idea of manliness, one in which “[r]estraint defined normative masculinity, and, in principle, sexual self-control was exercised by even the Higher Sodomites at Cambridge” (Taddeo 21). Yet Strachey struggled with this self-control; he saw “Oriental and working-class youths as more permissive and as likely practitioners of the ‘lower sodomy.’ Though he wrote endless essays on the spiritual joys of Brotherly Love, he found the pursuit of these sexual ‘others’ to be a much easier and less guilt-ridden enterprise” (Taddeo 8), and he could indulge in these practices privately and they would not negatively impact on the ideals of the “higher” sodomy which he publicly promoted. However, the fact that Strachey engaged in both “higher” and “lower” love is indicative of his ambivalence regarding his sexuality. While he publicly promoted the lofty principles of homosexuality as propounded by the Apostles, he struggled privately with homosexuality and as to how he should act on his sexual desires, given the choice between “higher” and “lower” love; it is this ambivalence to which I now turn.

Certainly Strachey was open-minded and vocal, often shocking other Apostles with his outspokenness regarding buggery, but this was certainly done with a sense of self-deprecating humour, as is shown in the following letter to Carrington. The separation between the “higher” and “lower” love is echoed as Strachey writes as a disembodied narrator describing himself as “always [being] a depraved fellow. At Cambridge, I remember, his conversation got so ... well, so downright nasty that I was obliged to turn him out of the room ... And now the wretch has come & got hold of my hand, and is making me write all this. But I assure you, Missy, it’s not me at all – bless your pretty

eyes – it's [h]e as is doin[g] it" (9 March 1917). Thus Strachey knew his actions could be seen as "depraved" and "downright nasty," yet maintained a sense of humour and remained devoted to Brotherly Love.<sup>18</sup>

What is of interest, though, is that Strachey chooses to distance himself from his persona at Cambridge, thus showing an ambivalence, if not insecurity, at his being gay, a persona which he feels he can share with Carrington. But this letter was written twelve years after Strachey had left Cambridge and is indicative of a progression in his "coming-out" process; as Julian Symons says: "[t]he division in Strachey's personality between fascination held for him by male beauty and the desire for sexual satisfaction undoubtedly changed with the years" (4). Initially, while at Cambridge, it was no doubt easier to maintain just a "fascination" for "male beauty," and devotion to Brotherly Love, but away from its confines, living in London, it would be increasingly difficult to deny his "desire for sexual satisfaction."

At Cambridge devotion to Brotherly Love, or Hellenism, served two functions. According to Taddeo: "it shielded the Brothers from affiliation with the newly identified, illegal, and pathological type, the 'homosexual' or 'invert', and also guaranteed the Apostles' status as members of an elite circle of privileged men. Strachey and his Brothers built on an already established Victorian bourgeois tradition of 'manly love' to identify themselves as superior to all women and most men beneath their social and educational levels" (Taddeo 6-7). This echoes ancient Greek society in that "love as a

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<sup>18</sup> This letter to Carrington takes on the form of a parody, which essentially allows Strachey the medium to mock himself not only by distancing himself from his homosexuality, but also allowing him to indulge in it. Parody will be discussed further in the following chapter.

serious emotion [...] mean[t] love between males” (Crompton 2). Needless to say, women were seen as inferior and as belonging to the “‘phenomenal’ and insignificant world of Cambridge” (Taddeo 9). The Apostles divided the world into two; “reality” consisted only of the Brotherhood and that which was embodied by its tenets while everything else belonged to the “phenomenal”. The latter included women, lower classes, and those who were not as well educated. In short, it entrenched the elitism of the Apostle Society and its members.

Garnett claims that while Strachey was homosexual, “he did not dislike women: quite the contrary. Some of his happiest relationships were with such women friends as Virginia Woolf, Dorelia John, Ottoline Morrell, his cousin Mary St John Hutchinson, and his sisters Dorothy Bussy and Pippa Strachey. By far the most important was his relationship with Carrington, with whom he fell in love in the spring and summer of 1916” (Preface 11).<sup>19</sup> Taddeo is extremely critical of this perspective on Strachey, and while these friendships with women may have been Strachey’s “happiest relationships,” she claims that they prove him to be a conventional patriarch.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Garnett, in making this claim, draws attention to the commonly held assumption that gay men, and by extension Strachey, are misogynists. Garnett, gay himself, does not seem to be disputing this assumption, but is rather using Strachey as an exception to the rule. What I find of greater importance, though, in examining the relationship between Carrington and Strachey is that Garnett is one of the few scholars, biographers or critics to write that Strachey “fell in love” with Carrington. Usually one reads of her being “hypnotised” (Holroyd 353) or “mesmerised” (Curtis 124) and “falling absolutely in love with him” (Gerzina 70). Levy speaks of her “*coup de foudre*” (in Strachey, *Letters* 299), Lehman claims that “[s]he fell in love, and devoted the rest of her life to him” (88), Spalding writes that “Strachey attracted the devotion of the painter” (60) and Caws writes that “she seems to have fallen hopelessly in love with him at that moment” (3).

<sup>20</sup> Garnett was a contemporary of Strachey and was attracted to Carrington – “I enjoyed looking at her” (Preface 9) – and is perhaps less critical of their relationship than is Taddeo, who classifies herself as a “feminist historian” (10).

Strachey's friendships with Virginia Woolf, Lady Ottoline Morrell, and Dora Carrington have been misrepresented by scholars as evidence of the writer's feminist sympathies. In fact, Strachey preferred women as nurturers and nurses rather than as artistic equals and rivals. The correspondence between Strachey and Carrington, with whom he shared a country residence from 1915 – 1932, offers not a picture of two androgynous souls in perfect communion, but one that bordered on a conventional patriarchal union of male economic provider and female caretaker, hostess, and domestic drudge. (9)

What Taddeo seemingly fails to take into account is that neither Strachey nor Carrington was interested in androgyny, certainly not "in perfect communion"; rather, they were attempting to live a life which would allow them to express their love in a way which didn't impinge on their obvious sexual differences. Carrington's bisexuality allowed her to love Strachey, but his love for her was discordant with his homosexual tendencies and the Apostolic philosophies.

How then does Strachey reconcile his love for Carrington, a woman, who was not as well educated as he and who was much younger than he? I argue that, with the presence of a scholastic and sexual dimension, the relationship between Carrington and Strachey is usefully seen as an alternative form of pederasty. Strachey would have defied the Apostolic ethos if he fell in love with a woman – this would have been viewed as "lower" love. However, if we read the relationship as a pederastic one, Carrington would,

essentially, be assimilated into his realm of “higher” love. She conformed to some of the basic characteristics of “higher” love in that she shared a Platonic love with Strachey, she was eager to learn from him, both socially and academically because she was not on par with him intellectually, and finally, although she was a woman, she did not act in a “womanly” fashion. She often adopted a masculine gender identity, as I explain later. This masculine identity of Carrington’s attracted Strachey initially, so much so that he kissed her on their first meeting. However, her being female made it easier for Strachey to exercise sexual self-restraint, which the Apostles believed “defined normative masculinity” (Taddeo 21). If we read the relationship between Carrington and Strachey as a form of pederasty, we see that it would not have interfered with his Apostolic beliefs.

Dyfri Williams defines pederasty as a phenomenon originating in Ancient Greece, but also sanctioned in Rome, where there is a romantic and intellectual mentorship between a man and a male youth (54). Pederasty should not be seen as a form of paedophilia though; it was, and theoretically still is, age-controlled (usually the boy is between the ages of twelve and seventeen) and excludes females (Bullough 1). Carrington was obviously not male, but she adopts a masculine identity by displacing her femininity, as this chapter will show. Neither was she a youth, but was much younger than Strachey, thirteen years to be exact. According to Daniel Levinson, mentors should not be old enough to be parental figures but are usually a “half generation” older than their protégés (qtd. in Felber 169), which is applicable to the age difference between Carrington and Strachey. But the age difference between the two seems to have been exaggerated as Carrington’s insecurities, both sexually and in terms of her education, made her seem



quite juvenile by comparison, particularly as Strachey often overstated his (old) age and spoke of his “elderly habit of mind” (1 September 1916). Perhaps the age difference impacted the way Carrington perceived Strachey; she was certainly intrigued by his dominant intellectual and sexual self. Their relationship was encouraged by Mark Gertler, who was courting Carrington at the time; Gertler hoped that Strachey would use “his learning and authority to unravel the knot of Carrington’s virginity” (Holroyd 360).

Pederastic relationships were common and were most notably advocated by Plato, particularly in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. There is much debate which surrounds the exact nature of pederastic relationships. It is seen as an educative relationship in which the man prepares the boy to assume the responsibilities and offices of adulthood, with some scholars unwilling to acknowledge these relationships as sexual. Vern Bullough claims that “[s]ome couples undoubtedly limited their physical contact to [...] wrestling [and] reclining together on couches, but not going beyond kissing and fondling. Some presumably ejaculated between the thighs or buttocks of the boys[;] yet others, perhaps most, penetrated their lover anally” (1). Other scholars and critics debunk the myth that pederastic relationships were often seen as a form of mentorship. Beert Verstraete is even more vocal than Bullough in his discussion of Charles Huppert’s dissertation:

He [Hupperts] rejects the alleged predominance of the intergenerational model and the intercrural position, but even more important, disposes of the widely held notion that male homosexuality obeyed a basically pedagogical norm in Greek

society and culture, namely that the older man was to guide his younger partner into the responsibilities of adult male citizenship. [...] [T]his is a pious fiction promoted by only a few but very influential authors of the classical Greek period, especially Xenophon and Plato. Plato in particular was eager to clean up the male *eros* of his day by desexualising it and raising it to the loftiest possible heights of spirituality, as we can clearly see in his great dialogue on love, *The Symposium*. In fact, much of the sex that occurred between men was of the casual sort, and more durable romantic relationships were not necessarily predicated on a mentoring task awaiting the older partner. (13-14)

Nonetheless, the age-asymmetrical relationship between Carrington and Strachey is one in which there was a definite pedagogical element, with Strachey initially encouraging her in her relations with Gertler. Carrington admired Strachey and modelled much of her romantic and sexual behaviour on him and his experiences, as is discussed later in this chapter. However, I begin by discussing the excitement that existed between Carrington and Strachey, and how his first role as a mentor was to educate her as a means to rid her of her sexual prudishness for the benefit of Mark Gertler, which he did by teaching her English and French literature.

Carrington began her education at Bedford High School in May 1903, where she failed to “distinguish herself academically” (Gerzina 11). Gerzina goes on to cite records which note that Carrington’s spelling was poor but her drawing was good. This is clearly

evident in her handwritten and often illustrated letters. Nonetheless, Carrington enjoyed artistic success at Bedford, often winning prizes from the Royal Drawing Society of Great Britain and Ireland. This resulted in her teachers encouraging her to apply to the Slade School of Art in London, where she was accepted to continue her artistic training in 1910.

It was at the Slade that she met Mark Gertler - he was to be a seminal influence in both her personal life and her artistic endeavours. Gertler and Carrington were initially friends, but he soon began to position himself as her suitor from the time she was 18. He very early on in their relationship began to place pressure on Carrington to sleep with him (Gerzina 39), but she refused his sexual advances, causing him great frustration and this became an issue in their relationship, one which prompted lengthy letters between the two debating the merits of sexual virtue. Gertler, according to Gerzina, was madly and passionately in love with her and resorted to various tactics in order to persuade her that physical love was necessary in a relationship. He primarily used the tack that if she loved him emotionally, she should love him physically; he also appealed to her artistic sensibility. Gerzina remarks that “love and art were now used to define each other” (42). Gertler tried to convince her that not only was sex an expression of love, but it was also an aesthetic act which reflected the beauty of their love. Yet this was all to no avail.

Gertler grew increasingly frustrated and shared these frustrations about Carrington with his friend Gilbert Cannan, who would later fictionalise their thwarted courtship in his novel, *Mendel*. Their love-story would also be (re)written by Wyndam Lewis in *The*

*Apes of God*, by Aldous Huxley in *Crome Yellow*, and by D.H. Lawrence in *Women in Love* and in his short story, “None of That”. The very fact that so many authors wrote about Gertler and Carrington indicates that there was very little confidentiality or privacy regarding their physical relationship or lack thereof. Their relationship also became a topic of conversation at Lady Ottoline Morrell’s Garsington Manor in Oxford. Lady Morrell was a supporter of the arts and one of Gertler’s benefactors; her home was often seen as a kind of refuge in the country for the intellectual elite of the time, including Strachey, who soon befriended Gertler and later Carrington.

Gertler was impressed with Strachey’s knowledge of the arts and literature and in 1916 struck upon the idea of asking him to intervene in his relations with Carrington. Strachey was seen as an “apostle of sexual license” (Holroyd 360), largely because of his being a member of Cambridge’s Apostle Society, which aimed to “challenge the moral rigidity of their parents’ generation with their own code of sexual and masculine behaviour” (Taddeo 15). In Gertler’s mind, Strachey would surely be able to help Carrington overcome her apathetic attitude towards sex. Strachey succeeded in getting Carrington to succumb sexually, but Gertler’s plan backfired. Strachey, in his intervention, intrigued Carrington and in favouring him, and eventually falling in love with him, she began to distance herself from Gertler, eventually breaking off their courtship. Apart from Gertler, many of Carrington’s friends could not comprehend her relationship with Strachey. Dorothy Brett wrote to Holroyd:

How and why Carrington became so devoted to him [Strachey] I don’t know. Why she submerged her talent and whole life in him, a

mystery ... Gertler's hopeless love for her, most of her friendships I think were partially discarded when she devoted herself to Lytton ... I know that Lytton at first was not too kind with Carrington's lack of literary knowledge. She pandered to his sex obscenities, I saw her, so I got an idea of it. I ought not to be prejudiced. I think Gertler and I could not help being prejudiced. It was so difficult to understand how she could be attracted. (qtd. in Gerzina xviii)

While Brett claims that Carrington "pandered to [Strachey's] sex obscenities", Holroyd and Gerzina have written about Carrington's aversion to sex (Gerzina 11, 52-52; Holroyd 353-354). She was the product of her late-Victorian upbringing and heavily influenced not only by her mother, but by the social conventions of the period. Gerzina claims that "it is doubtful that she knew very much about sex at all" (39). Brett, in speaking of Strachey's "sex obscenities", conveys her own Victorian naivety, but in Carrington's case much of this sexual repression is partly ascribed to her mother. Noel Carrington, in speaking about his mother's prudishness, writes that "[a]ny mention of sex or the common bodily functions was unthinkable. We were not even expected to know that a woman was pregnant" ("Carrington's early life" 504).

Yet Carrington seems to have soon learnt the sexual discourse used by those in Bloomsbury, although subtly. In July 1918, Carrington wrote to Strachey:

Nothing matters except your presence & to have you to talk with...  
[W]hen I read that Greek anthology I longed to be a youth to give

you that peculiar ecstasy – to make you happy in return for all you  
give me.

Several things are clear from this letter which shows us elements of Greek pederasty which mark their relationship. It indicates that both of them were interested in Greek literature and their letters are filled with references to Greek and Roman figures (I provide more evidence of this later). It is also significant that it is within this context that Carrington expresses a longing to fulfil Strachey's desires. She wishes to give Strachey "that peculiar ecstasy." This reference to sexual gratification, albeit expressed rather shyly, is a sexual gratification which she cannot provide unless she was a "youth". This echoes Williams's definition of pederasty as a sexual and intellectual mentorship between a man and a male youth, as discussed earlier.

In March 1917 Carrington writes to Strachey saying "I saw such a lovely Greek Boy – very like the catamite of Hadrian sending off a wire in a post office this morning." Hadrian was a Roman emperor who helped to stabilise the Roman Empire, but he is better known for his passionate love for a young Bithynian named Antinous. When Antinous drowned in the Nile, Hadrian is said to have "wept for him like a woman" (Rice 1). Carrington, by referring to Hadrian and using the rather archaic word "catamite," a boy kept by an older man for homosexual purposes, suggests that this was a shared point of reference which they had possibly discussed. A year later in another letter she writes to tell him that she saw "some good Cretan Figures in the Museum and, oh Lytton, Antinous! What a Catamite to possess!" (Carrington, *Letters* 114). A month later, in April 1917, Carrington, Lytton, Maynard Keynes, James Strachey, Harry Norton and Alix

Sargant-Florence went to stay at the latter's home, Lord's Wood, on Marlow Common. According to Holroyd, "[t]he sun shone, Carrington, happily dressed in breeches, roamed the great woods, painted the greedy intellectual Alix, read Plato 'and was very excited over it', and in the evening listened to James playing Bach and Beethoven on the pianola" (384). Here Holroyd himself draws attention to the fact that Carrington would have been familiar with Platonic concepts of love, and that she "was very excited over it".

But no matter how much Carrington wanted to be a youth, or even a catamite, for Strachey, it was physically impossible. However, as "performativity is something everyone does in order to inhabit a gendered identity," according to Sarah Chinn (294), it was possible for Carrington to construct a gendered identity which Strachey would find attractive. Judith Butler argues that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (*Gender Trouble* 34). Thus Carrington could express herself as more masculine and these performative acts would compose a gender identity which would be complementary to Strachey's. Carrington began to adopt more masculine attributes even before meeting him – at the Slade she dropped her feminine first name of Dora and was known simply as Carrington. She altered her physical appearance by cutting her hair short at the Slade, and was known as a crop-head and often wore breeches.

In the biopic entitled *Carrington* Strachey is shown to have first mistaken her for being a striking youth when he remarks to Vanessa Bell: "Who on earth is that ravishing boy?" Strachey must have found her attractive; Holroyd claims that he kissed her at their first

meeting, which caused Carrington much alarm (353). She was horrified when he tried to embrace her, resulting in her complaining to Barbara Hiles that “that horrid old man with a beard kissed me” (Holroyd 353). It could be argued that Carrington’s masculine appearance and Strachey’s homosexual desire conflated in such a way that “various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 190). Mary Ann Caws claims that Strachey was “attracted by her boyish figure” (3); thus Carrington “performs” masculine attributes and by doing so she (re)creates herself as masculine and attracts Strachey; he seemingly focuses more on her gender identity than on her sex or “corporeal body,” as Carrington called it (Holroyd 357).

Yet it is not only these more physical manifestations of a masculine identity which convince me of Carrington’s longing to be a youth, but in her letters this desire is even more explicit, particularly in terms of her body or sex, to the extent that, when having an attractive man model for her, she claims “I almost had an erection over his beauty” (5 August 1917). About this same man she writes:

I had a grand scene with Geoffrey in the kitchen, eating chunks of meat pie. He made passionate declarations of his most serious and everlasting love for me. Whereupon I played the Strachey God, & said ‘aren’t you being a *little* hysterical. You see I know really what you are like & what is going on inside you ...’ ... and delivered a long lecture of being insincere, & inventing crises – so he frowned[,] desperately assured me I completely misunderstood



him - & then was more humble in the dust, than it is fit for man to be. Whereupon I pounced on him heartily & kissed him violently. Which made him very awkward & embarrassed [*sic*]!!! (qtd. in Gerzina 53)

Two things are apparent from this and other similar letters: Carrington revelled in the attentions of men and took pleasure in flirting with them. It is clear that at this stage she is testing the limits of her sexuality, downplaying it when she is challenged by a sexual/romantic advance, but also wielding it as a tool of great power. It is evident from this extract that she enjoyed using her sexuality to mock and perhaps even undermine men. Linked to this is the way she characterises men and women. By calling Geoffrey a “*little* hysterical” and telling him that he is “inventing crises,” she relies on characteristics usually ascribed to women. She concludes this encounter by taking on an uncharacteristically active, and almost animalistic role, sexually normally reserved for men, by “pounc[ing] on him heartily & kiss[ing] him violently.” It seems from these early encounters that Carrington is willing to experiment with gender types. “[She rejected her lovers, but continually lured them back” (Gerzina xiv), as this continual acceptance and rejection allowed her to explore her sexual power and attractions. It also indicates Carrington’s insecurities regarding her sexuality.

The incident is also significant in that she imitates Strachey’s sexual conduct when he first met her and she draws attention to him as the “Strachey God”, which is indicative of her following (and honouring) his example. In examining the kiss between Strachey and

Carrington, we see similarities. As Strachey had clutched Carrington and forced a kiss upon her, she now leaps upon Geoffrey, kissing him violently. This slight sexual aggression caused Geoffrey to be awkward and embarrassed – a reflection of the awkwardness, anger and even resentment which Carrington felt towards Strachey at the time of their first embrace. Holroyd describes Carrington's reaction to Strachey's kiss as such:

[N]o amount of explanation could wash away her resentment. Planning to pay him out [for the kiss] she tiptoed very early the next morning into Lytton's bedroom, taking a pair of scissors with which she intended to snip away his beard while he slept. It was to be one of those devastating practical jokes of which she was so fond – a perfect revenge for his audacity. But the plan misfired. As she leant over him, Lytton opened his eyes and looked at her. It was a moment of curious intimacy, and she, who hypnotised so many others, was suddenly hypnotised herself. (353)

By modelling her sexual behaviour on Strachey and what he did to her, Carrington assumes the role of the *eromenos*, or youth, who learns from the older *erastes* within a sexual mentoring relationship.

Carrington's attraction to other men also imitates Strachey's. When in France she writes to him:

Already I have in the making three lovers, a road mender with a big beard who breaks stones at the side of the road, a young sailor

with sweet blue eyes and pale down on his cheek, who lives on the little river steamer, and a French young lady of easy virtue, who keeps my painting apparatus in her house by the bridge so that I don't have to carry it up the hill everyday. I did so love your letter. It was simply full of the smell of your beard and Tidmarsh. (25 September 1919)

Here we see that Strachey is indeed the model for Carrington's sexual behaviour. Her three, seemingly arbitrary, lovers all have definitive elements of Strachey. The road mender with the big beard bears an obviously similarity to Strachey, and her attraction, if not fascination, with the metonymic beard is evidenced by her commenting on the "full smell of [Strachey's] beard." This is clearly something which deeply attracts her and is equated with Tidmarsh, the focal point of their domesticity. As mentioned earlier, Carrington was fascinated by Strachey's facial hair from the very early days of their acquaintance, it being the catalyst for Strachey hypnotising her. She writes about when she "saw [him] in the bath, ... lay on [his] bed ... & saw [his] eyelashes and [his] face so very near and smelt [his] hair, and broke the cracking beard in [her] fingers" (10 June 1918). The road mender's beard, however, functions traditionally, and symbolically, by being associated with virility and strength in that he "breaks stones at the side of the road." In contrast, Strachey's beard is not seen as a sign of masculinity, but rather used to describe his fragility as the "cracking beard" is juxtaposed with the delicacy of his eyelashes, his face and his hair – characteristics she focused on during a clearly intimate moment in which she lay on his bed.

The second lover is described rather tenderly, much the way she discusses Strachey, in that she focuses on his facial features in intimate detail. His “sweet blue eyes” and the “pale down on his cheek” are reminiscent of Strachey’s eyelashes, face and the smell of his hair; both of these descriptions seem to focus on the slight effeminacy of the objects of her desire. Also, Carrington’s taking up a sailor as a lover supports the fact that both she and Strachey had a penchant for sailors. From the early days of their correspondence it is clear that seamen were a shared object of desire; after knowing each other for barely a year, Carrington wrote to Strachey telling him of “[a] house on Wapping Stairs, and very cheap, to let, with a river all round it ... and sailors!” (29 November 1916). She also wrote of having “spied a lovely sailor in the village sauntering along the road” (12 July 1917). While on a boating trip with her brother, Noel, as well as Ralph Partridge, and his sister, Dorothy, she writes to Strachey from their boat “lying in mid-Thames” (20 March 1920), of the “amazing little cabin boy” and in speaking of the rest of the crew she writes that “[n]one of them wore sailor’s clothes... but perhaps they will sail us alright.” It is seemingly a shared proclivity, or arguably Carrington is attracted to sailors because Strachey is attracted to sailors. Garnett claims that “[h]er sexual love was unconsciously directed to her brother Teddy, killed in 1916 in the war, who played a large part in her dream life.<sup>21</sup> She thought of him always as a sailor and her last love affair was with a sailor whom she identified with Teddy and who had many of his attractive qualities” (Preface 12-13).<sup>22</sup> To my mind, while Garnett claims her unconscious sexual love was

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<sup>21</sup> See the conclusion (145) for a discussion of Teddy Carrington and how he reminded her of her lover, Beakus Penrose.

<sup>22</sup> Teddy was missing in action from November 1916 and his death was officially declared in October 1917 – almost a year after he had gone missing and after Carrington and Strachey had first slept together (Gerzina 97, 106, 119-120).

directed to Teddy, I think her conscious love of sailors replicated Strachey's attractions particularly when viewed in light of the other evidence.

The third lover, the "French young lady of easy virtue" is one of the first indications Carrington gives of experiencing lesbian desires and this is undoubtedly informed by Strachey's homosexuality as he was her first exposure to same-sex relations. When Carrington's friend, Barbara Hiles, told her that Strachey was homosexual, Carrington responded by asking "What's that?" (qtd. in Holroyd 353). While she may have been familiar with the concept, her Victorian upbringing certainly never equipped her with the terminology.

What is interesting, though, is that Carrington mentions the French woman's "easy virtue" and this is no doubt reflective of Carrington's rather capricious nature when it came to affairs of the heart. It also echoes Strachey's "lower" sexual encounters. On 3 September 1916 he wrote of his day to her, which included "drifting through the town," being "picked up ... by an amiable old gent in the Y.M.C.A. lines," as well as an encounter with "a young man, wonderfully evil-looking and rather attractive, whom [he] suddenly came face to face with, as [he] was leaving the [British] Museum down a queer twisting alley that leads to it." Carrington's mention of easy virtue mirrors Strachey's rather risqué and covert sexual tendencies, and again we see how her sexual behaviour mimics that of Strachey, and this dovetails with the idea of Carrington being rather insecure regarding everything that pertained to her sexuality. The fact that she mentioned

both male and female lovers does not only, I feel, reflect her bisexual disposition, but speaks, once again, of her insecurity regarding both love and lovers.

She writes to Strachey in September 1920 telling him of a dream:

Last night I dreamt I was a man, & had a[n] implement which I could take off & examine in my hand & then put back again into a socket. It came I think from struggling with a new camera which I bought yesterday at Winchester & in the evening I took its inside out & then couldn't put it back again. I hope it will turn out a good machine. But I was sorry to wake up this morning a woman again.

It is quite obvious from this letter that Carrington not only has a desire, on occasion, to perform masculine behaviour, but is also rather keen on the idea of possessing a phallus or "implement," that is physically "being" a man. It is quite symbolic, though, that the phallic symbol, which is implicitly compared to a camera lens in her dream, is one that can be used and removed as needed, evincing Butler's theory of performativity; acts or expressions of gender can be done consciously with a level of agency and are representations which are independent of the "real". Carrington can thus don acts of masculinity whenever it suits her needs, but these desires to be masculine are also deeply embedded in her subconscious self, as the dream illustrates.

Carrington's unequivocal wish to be a man was a conscious desire as well. In one of her diary entries, in which she directly addresses Strachey, she confesses:

If I was a man I should heap you with presents, bags of soft something, until you *had* to cry out thanks because they overflowed on top of you, and weighed you down. I would love to explore your mind behind your finely skinned forehead. You seem so wise and very coldly old. Yet in spite of this what a peace to be with you, and how happy I was today. (Carrington, *Letters* 52)

This is similar to a wish she expresses in a letter to Julia Strachey:

I wish I was a young man and not a hybrid monster, so that I could please you a little in some way, with my affection. You know you move me strangely. I remember for some reason every thing you say and do, you charm me so much. This letter is rather distraught, but I am worn out with going into too many internal ecstasies – and then I was too excited all day to eat anything but some lettuce. (Carrington, *Letters* 427)

Carrington not only expresses her desire to be a man, or at the very least masculine, but by voicing her regret at “wak[ing] up this morning a woman again” she is seemingly willing to do so at the expense of being a female. However, because she is physiologically a woman, yet desires to be a man, she considers herself a “hybrid monster.” She often focused on negative feminine qualities, such as when she writes of Dorelia John: “[She’s] a beautiful woman, but so secretive. That’s the drawback of women. They are so secretive, so on guard. Such cats!!!” (23 July 1917). Also, at the prospect of returning to her Tidmarsh after being in London, she writes to Strachey

telling him of how she looked forward to “solitude and a house where the female tongue wags no more” (21 November 1919).

On several other occasions she voices distaste for the female body and takes particular issue with menstruation, causing her to remark “to [her] horror [her] disease femaloritis descended also gallons of rain.” Menstruation was termed as a “vile female pain” (31 October 1919), the “fiend of blackness” (12 March 1921), the “Blight of Females” (12 April 1924), and a “hideous burden” (Gerzina 65). She also confides in Strachey that “you can’t think how disgusting, that’s the only word, it is to find oneself a female. I can’t get accustomed to it” (22 February 1919). She wrote to Gertler telling him how much she hated “being a girl ... tied – with female encumbrances, and hanging flesh” (Holroyd 377). Of Dorothy Partridge, her future sister-in-law, she says:

Watched D.P. dress. How revolting women are. It came over me suddenly all their apparatus stays, & hideous underclothes - & worst of all that bunchy shape – like a stuffed pin cushion. She has a pretty fat face with pink cheeks, very dark brown eyes & pale yellow straight hair. As I always imagine young German girls must look. (Gerzina 143)

It is not only the revulsion Carrington feels for her womanly body, but also her loathing of the conventions associated with womanhood, particularly childbearing and rearing, which suggests that she harboured a deep-seated ambivalence about her femaleness. The taking on of a masculine identity reflected her self-loathing for her own body and the conventions which surrounded the female form. While she could not physically please



Strachey, a masculine identity would allow her to take on a role which enabled her to engage in what I am arguing is a form of pederasty.

When Strachey first met Carrington, she was particularly vulnerable, given the pressure Gertler had been placing on her to sleep with him. It was also during this time that Carrington met many people associated with the Bloomsbury group and she began to regret her lack of learning, and this feeling of inadequacy caused her to embark on a long course of self-education. In a letter to her brother, Noel Carrington, she expressed her determination to improve her education: “I am going to insist that seriously you teach me English History, and French – see? Because I am determined to no longer be so stupid and lacking in knowledge!” (Gerzina 73-74). Garnett discusses her education:

She was uneducated, but appeared much more ignorant than she was because she misplaced the letters in spelling words [...]  
Although she had no background of general knowledge, she was a remarkably well-read young woman before she ever met Lytton, and had a very decided taste of her own in literature. She had a longing to make up for her ignorance and Lytton was an ideal teacher. (Preface 13)

She began spending more time with Strachey a few months after their initial meeting at Asheham. Strachey encouraged her to read poems by Rimbaud and Marvell, and he took it upon himself to teach her French. He provided her with what she had lacked – a structured plan or approach to her reading. They spent more and more time together, becoming fonder of each other. Strachey was “a teacher who was eager to share his own

insights and knowledge with an equally eager student” (Gerzina 74), and Carrington regarded him as the “most worthy, learned & withal charming character” (10 June 1918). It was not only in the sphere of sexuality and scholarship that Strachey occupied the role of a “tutelary genius” to Carrington (Woolf, *Diary: Vol. 2* 333), but also in her social relationships. She writes to Strachey, saying “My dear one, I wish I was wiser, more sensitive. You must correct me a little, teach me sometimes” (12 May 1921).<sup>23</sup> Years later she comments, “I rely so entirely on your judgement” (25 September 1923).

Strachey relished the role of being doted on by Carrington, seeing himself as a mentor. On 28 July 1916 he signs a letter “your utterly dissolved missionary,” with the “y” of “missionary” turning into a doodle of an erect penis, showing that sex and sexuality were a common component of this mentorship, even before they slept together roughly a month later. By being the missionary, Strachey also takes on the role of the *erastes* meant to teach the *eromenos*. The letter was written from the Savile Club, Piccadilly, after he was asked to act as a chaperone to Carrington’s friend Barbara Hiles and her future husband, Nicholas Bagenal, on a holiday in Wales. Strachey asked if he could bring Carrington and wrote to her:

I hope you will have seen Barbara, and heard from her about Wales. Do you think you could come? It sounds as if it might be pleasant. [...] Rather a long way off, but does that signify? I went this afternoon to your studio in the dim hope that you might have been there – distracted and hot. In case you don’t see Barbara, I’d

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<sup>23</sup> Strachey paid for Carrington and Partridge’s honeymoon in Italy, but Partridge threatened to break off the engagement after an argument with Carrington as to where they were to live. This is discussed at length in Chapter 4.

better add that the place is a cottage belonging to her people in the region of Llandudno, and that the company will be she, Nick, and your grandpapa. Will you write and let me know what you think of it? [...] Write, write, write for Jesu's sake! You must come to Wales. (28 July 1916)

Three days later he wrote “no time for more, as the post is leaving, and if this doesn't reach you tomorrow, it never will, I imagine. It is chiefly to say that whatever happens, you must come to Wales” (1 August 1916) Again, later that same day, he wrote a rather flirtatious letter in which he says: “But of one thing be assured, we should all be quite *désolés* if you didn't arrive in the mountains. They obviously wanted you to come very much; and as for me, I hardly feel as if I could bear it if you didn't. So make up your mind to it, please Mademoiselle, and no recoilings.” Clearly Strachey was desperate for Carrington to join them. Garnett reveals in *Great Friends* that Strachey, before embarking on the trip to Wales, needed to confess his love for Carrington:

Lytton then said that he thought he was in love with Carrington. This was told [to] me in a hesitating mixture of eagerness and deprecation. He had burst out because he needed to make a confidence. And then came the fear that he had been indiscreet. I was asked to swear not to repeat what he had told me to either Duncan [Grant] or Vanessa [Bell]. Duncan would tell Vanessa, and she would relate it in a letter to Virginia, and the fat would be in

the fire. Ottoline would hear of it, which would be fatal. I did not breathe a word of Lytton's secret. (150)

This confession on Strachey's part gives an indication to the reasoning behind his adamant demands and "eagerness" for Carrington to join them on the trip, so much so that he even offered to pay her travelling expenses as she was penniless at the time. It also dispels the common perception that Carrington's love was unrequited.

After this trip, Carrington and Strachey left Barbara Hiles and Nicholas Bagenal and continued on a tour of the West Country. It is this latter half of the journey which scholars use to date the loss of Carrington's virginity. However, one is almost inclined to believe, based on Strachey's enthusiasm, that the consummation was planned beforehand, although Carrington's initial reluctance based on her poverty and the disapproval of her mother belie this proposition. This reluctance could again be attributed to Carrington's fear of sexual relations, regardless of who the prospective lover might be; nevertheless, she did "burn her boats and go" (Holroyd 373). It is also a possibility that they had had a sexual relationship before the trip to Wales, particularly when taking into account the signature from the "utterly dissolved missionary" and the drawing of the penis. It is important to note that during this period Strachey made no attempt to repress his homosexuality, as can be seen in the poem quoted below, which suggests the two of them slept together. According to Holroyd, Carrington and Strachey stayed at Glastonbury on the night of 28 August and "shared a hotel bed" (376). The next day Carrington wrote a letter to Keynes. On the back Strachey had written:

When I'm winding up the toy  
Of a pretty little boy,  
- Thank you, I can manage pretty well;  
But how to set about  
To make a pussy pout  
- *That* is more than I can tell.<sup>24</sup>

The above letters show that both Carrington and Strachey were in love with each other and that they attempted a sexual relationship; unfortunately such a conventional sexual relationship failed for obvious reasons. Despite these difficulties, I agree with Gerzina who writes that “the remarkable thing was that they cared enough about each other to attempt it” (90).<sup>25</sup> She continues:

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<sup>24</sup> Attached to a second letter written to Carrington was another poem Strachey had written which reveals his homosexuality and his perceived inability to love a woman (1 August 1916):

**Perverse**

God sends him all that earth can yield  
In richest flowers to lure his soul;  
But he a daisy from the field  
Wears as his button hole.

God sends him luscious fruits and rare  
To tempt his palate & subtlest edge;  
But he rejoices in the fare  
Of the berry from the hedge.

God sends him purple wine to drink,  
And silken softness for his dress;  
But he stoops to the fountain's brink  
In ragged nakedness.

God sends him ladies fair, with charms  
Brilliant and strange for his sole joy;  
But he lies nightly with his arms  
About the blacksmith's boy.

<sup>25</sup> Most critics consider this to be the first time that Carrington and Strachey had sex. Levy states that “they shared a bed and Lytton finally relieved Carrington of her troublesome virginity” (qtd. in

They became lovers, but physical love was made difficult and became impossible. The trouble on Lytton's side was his diffidence and feeling of inadequacy, and his being perpetually attracted by young men; and on Carrington's side her intense dislike of being a woman, which gave her a feeling of inferiority so that a normal and joyful relationship was next to impossible.

(Garnett, Preface 11)

Carrington's dislike of being a woman has been discussed, but Garnett raises the issue of Strachey's shortcomings as a heterosexual lover – what he would have viewed as a “lower” form of love. He was clearly disappointed in his performance and seems quite apologetic in his letter to Carrington on their return, writing that “[i]ndeed, indeed it is all most melancholy. But it was delightful while it lasted, and I'm so very glad that we managed to bring it off. I only wish my innards had been less jolty – to say nothing of my elderly habit of mind. Oh, to be a smiling Hercules!” (1 September 1916).

After Glastonbury, they went to Bath from where Strachey wrote to Garnett telling him of “the infectious enthusiasm of my youthful companion” enjoining it with “you smile but you are mistaken” (*Great Friends* 152). It is this latter remark that led Garnett to believe that Strachey began “the façade of being entirely homosexual” as he believes

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Strachey, *Letters* 320). In a footnote, Levy also refers to correspondence with Holroyd in which the latter related a conversation with Alix Strachey who revealed “in the presence of her husband, James [Strachey] [...] that ‘there were a few bed experiments of one sort or another ... After a relatively short period, these were phased out. And yes, I [Holroyd] was told (though Lytton had felt himself attracted by one or two girls – Katherine Mansfield, for example), Carrington was the only girl he actually took to bed. This was why August 1916 attracted so much gossip.’ Barbara Bagenal also confirmed the story to Holroyd” (qtd. in Strachey, *Letters* 321).

Strachey was intimating that he was not in love with Carrington and wanted to pre-empt any suspicious rumours:

He [Strachey] was alarmed lest his liaison with an apparently unsophisticated young woman should excite the malicious hilarity of Lady Ottoline Morrell – hilarity spiced with perhaps jealousy? He had to keep up his reputation of being indifferent to, and rather horrified by, attractive young women. There were solid reasons also. Carrington's parents had to be kept in ignorance, and Gertler's jealousy not excited ... it was also convenient for Lytton to know that he was always a welcome guest at Lady Ottoline's country house ... it would be impossible to stay at Garsington if he were to be constantly teased about having fallen victim to the charms of a countrified girl. (Garnett qtd. in Gerzina 90)

This is echoed by Levy who claims that Strachey was “at first alarmed, for he was ‘officially’ gay, and though homosexuality was illegal, he did not want the world – his world – to know about his bisexual tendencies” (xiv).

Strachey's relationship with Carrington was not the first time he experienced doubt over his sexuality. In a letter to his confidante, Leonard Woolf (1 July 1902), he wrote:

[I am] among ladies, whom I *cannot* fall in love with. One of them is beautiful, young, charming – oughtn't I to be in love with her? We go for walks together, read each other sonnets, sit together o' nights, among moons, stars and the whole romantic paraphernalia

– oughtn't I to be in love? Oughtn't I - ? It's *my* disease, I'm  
afraid, not to be! (Strachey, *Letters* 9-10)

Strachey's description of "romantic paraphernalia" resonates with the manner in which his relationship to Carrington is portrayed, particularly in the film. They are depicted going for a walk over the Sussex downs while staying at Asheham, lying under a tree together at Garsington, and it corresponds with photographs of the two which show them reading together. In the letter quoted above, Strachey is clearly enamoured of the woman, but is self-censuring in his adamant refusal to fall in love, emphasising the word "*cannot*" and blaming it on "*my* disease." The fact that he queries what he can or cannot do, as well as taking responsibility for nothing happening because of his lack of desire, the reason being a "disease," shows Strachey's ambivalence once again. It also indicates a repressed desire for women and indicates that, in all likelihood, Strachey had bisexual impulses and was certainly curious about woman's sexuality. In another letter to Leonard Woolf (18 June 1904) he writes:

He was fairly divine, but there was a young sister – 15? – with short skirts and long hair, whom I really was more in love with. I believe it's the most degraded form of womanising – but one must begin somewhere. She had a wonderful squashy red mouth all on one side, and as she tipped back in her chair, I really did want just to lift up her short petticoats and see what I should see. When I do love a woman, she'll be immense, and a whore. (Strachey, *Letters* 29)



This letter is particularly fascinating in that Strachey is attracted to a woman with “short skirts and long hair” - someone who differed completely from Carrington. Yet it shows that while Strachey considered himself to be homosexual, he did have bisexual tendencies. Strachey seems to have repressed his heterosexual urges at the stage when he met Carrington and his sexual ambivalence and her sexual insecurities seemed to prohibit a “normal and joyful relationship”. They had to engage in another form of relationship and, as I have shown, a pederastic relationship seemed an option as it could withstand both Strachey’s way of life and Carrington’s insecurities. Traditionally the *erastes* is used to describe the lover, or active partner, a role which Strachey arguably occupies before their initial sexual encounter in that he desperately wanted Carrington to join him in Wales. The *eromenos* is the beloved, or passive partner, and is usually younger, yet unlike in a pederastic relationship Carrington was not a youth, but her profound self-doubts, both sexually and intellectually, made her style herself in the role of an *eromenos*, eager to learn from Strachey.

However, most of the time, notably after the consummation of their relationship, Carrington and Strachey’s roles are inverted somewhat, in that she is far more active and vocal about her feelings for him. This becomes apparent when reading the almost anxious declarations of love she continuously makes in her letters to him. She writes “I have missed you rather – does that please you vain wretch: my love – Carrington” (8 March 1917) and “I missed you horribly today... & felt slightly angry for having confessed to you that I did care so much. How loveable you are sometimes [...] Yr loving Carrington” (22 March 1917). Strachey is far more reserved in his devotion and sometimes comes

across as being quite abashed at Carrington's emotional outpourings. His response to the above letter is: "I miss you too, you know. That was such a divine hour – why regret any of it? A great deal of a great many kinds of love, from Lytton" (23 March 1917). This kind of salutation stands in stark contrast to Carrington's, who writes a year later "Oh very dear Lytton. I send you tonight all my love in this little shell of tortoise for every grain of sugar a kiss and all the sweetness for my love, Your Carrington" (1 June 1918).

Yet, sexually, he seemingly took the initiative and was more explicit. Carrington writes and asks whether she will "be able to persuade [Strachey] to spend the night. No debaucheries – only the highest conversations" (30 July 1917). In comparison, Strachey writes:

Well, here I remain till it is, I fancy - certainly until this blizzard ceases – in bed, or just out of it, waited on by the invaluable Mrs Fare, rummaging in books, nibbling chickens, and sipping wine, snoozing off by the wood fire ... not such a bad existence, when one comes to think of it. Why not come & share it with me? Couldn't you get that woman's leave? And then, if I had a telegram from you tomorrow, you should have a taxi at the station ... is it all a vision? – We could return on Monday, perhaps. And, if you once got here you would hardly find it colder than London, and much less confusing – also one bed is warmer than two ... I mean ... but I keep forgetting ... Il Maestro! (9 March 1917)<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Carrington and Strachey both refer to Augustus John as "Il Maestro".

Carrington is far more reserved in her discussions of sex and in her advances towards Strachey, whereas he is more overt. While both of them certainly maintain a teasing tone of voice, they are seemingly playing with the idea of active and passive roles and at times invert the roles of the *erastes* and *eromenos*.

Carrington and Strachey do not practise conventional modes of pederasty, for obvious reasons, but education and sexuality were significant elements in their relationship, so much so that it was to Strachey that she lost her virginity – he was the one who in a sense inducted her into the realm of sex. Carrington takes on the role of the *eromenos*, willingly it seems, as she aspired to be a desirable object for Strachey by adopting certain masculine qualities while at the same time distancing herself from the female sex and its associated expressions of femininity. Instead, Carrington creates a gender identity that compensates for her sexual ambivalence and complements Strachey's desire. Similarly, Strachey managed to reconcile himself with his love for Carrington, despite her belonging to the "phenomenal", and, with her as his *eromenos*, he is still capable of embracing the Higher Sodomy and maintaining his loyalty to the accompanying principles. In assuming these roles, Carrington and Strachey come the closest to a realisation of the love they felt for each other – a love which allowed Carrington to come to terms with her insecurities and did not compromise Strachey's beliefs.

### Chapter 3: Parodic Reinventions

Strachey was a humorous man who had a “fondness for sexual jokes” (Hermione Lee 384). He is also known for his irreverence, often aimed at the British upper classes and the imperial systems which were created to protect the Empire. His best known work, *Eminent Victorians*, consisted of four satirical and scathing biographies of popular British figures and he revolutionised biography by writing critically of his subjects. “Lytton’s method in achieving this transformation was not simply to survey his specimens through the wrong end of his opera glasses, but to pick out salient trifles: the dirt in the ears of Italian Cardinals or Gordon’s brandies and sodas early in the day – much resented when first alleged by Lytton, [...] and generally admired twenty years later in the case of Winston Churchill, though he dispensed with the soda” (Garnett, *Great Friends* 155). Gerzina describes Strachey as being “enormously intelligent and witty, [and he] was known both for his kindness and his humour, which by contrast could be biting” (63).

Carrington, too, had a wicked sense of humour and was often particularly fond of practical jokes. This humour is most striking in the letters of Carrington and Strachey, many of which are playful and ironic. At times they tease each other, frequently about their respective (individual) sexual liaisons, but also draw attention to their own (failed) sexual relationship. In a letter written on 21 November 1919 she hints at their possible lovemaking when she ends it: “I do love you so much Lytton. Twenty kisses for your face – and three for the little acrobat” (Caws 7). She also signs a letter with “Love and

Lust from Your MOPSA XXXXX” (Carrington, *Letters* 101)<sup>27</sup> and “Hugger me, and Bugger me and cover me with Kisses” (Carrington, *Letters* 137). In this way they constantly teased one another and play with the idea of sex, even if it was seemingly unsuccessful – I surmise that at this stage of their relationship they were still living with the pretext of sexual compatibility and satisfaction. Often they are self-deprecating and critical of their relationship, commenting on its unconventionality and how it is precisely this unconventionality which brings about their shared happiness.

Carrington and Strachey experimented with sexual and gender norms and the accompanying hegemonic institutions and practices, not necessarily as a means to rebel against binary distinctions, but rather as a way of gently subverting them in order to inhabit a space which permitted their unorthodox relationship. However, by playing with these distinctions, they acknowledge that this dichotomy existed. I suggest in this chapter that Carrington and Strachey were certainly conscious of how unusual their relationship was, and because of that they inhabited an uneasy marginal space, even within the greater framework of Bloomsbury. It is from “these marginal positions that disruption and destabilization of the dominant norms becomes possible” (Alsop *et al.*, 100). Both of them were extremely fond of wittily mocking hegemonic forces and this obviously includes heteronormativity. While they often do this in an exaggerated fashion, as I later discuss, it also, when viewed with other evidence, hints at a rather painful desire to be “normal”.

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<sup>27</sup> Mopsa refers to the character in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*.

In this chapter I examine their domestic relationship within the realm of Tidmarsh and look at how it was modelled largely on a heterosexual one, as this was what they had been formatively exposed to; I also discuss their sardonic, and sometimes disparaging, attitude towards heterosexual conventions which sees them parodying these dominant norms, possibly in order to subvert them for several effects which I explore in this chapter. Firstly, their relationship served as a critique of their parents' Victorian marriages, partnerships which were seen as problematic. Secondly, Carrington and Strachey sought to destabilise, perhaps consciously or even unconsciously, the notions of a heterosexual relationship which was founded on the notion of binary gender distinctions. Lastly, it was also a means to manifest the love they had for one another in a social context which placed limitations on the love shared between a gay man and a bisexual woman.

Upon returning from their trip to Bath, where they consummated their relationship, Carrington and Strachey decided to live together in a cottage in the country. In the Hampton film, Strachey is shown to extend the offer to Carrington while in Wales before they slept together, but he then retracts it on account of his not being able to afford it. Nonetheless, Carrington later accepts his offer and was charged with finding them a home. According to the letters and biographies, though, this was not the first mention of Carrington and Strachey living together. A year before, in 1916, while Carrington was still in the throes of her volatile relationship with Gertler, Strachey wrote to Mary Hutchinson that “[t]he poor thing [Carrington] seems almost aux abois with Gertler forever at her, day in, day out – she talks of flying London, of burying herself in

Cornwall, or becoming a cinema actress. I of course suggested that she should live with me, which she luckily immediately refused – for one thing, I couldn't have afforded it" (Strachey, *Letters* 311).

It appears from this letter that Strachey asking Carrington to live with him was meant as a sort of "solution" to the Gertler-Carrington situation and it was clearly a rather spontaneous offer judging from his relief at her refusal; this "relief" was also perhaps a mask presented to the Bloomsbury front. Strachey often downplayed his relationship with Carrington, as discussed earlier in the introductory chapter, where he conveys to Virginia Woolf his annoyance and irritation at Carrington's persistent presence. One does wonder, though, why she did refuse his offer of cohabitation at that stage. Possibly both of them sensed the other's hesitancy over the relationship. Strachey in particular adopted a different discourse when writing to his other friends about Carrington and wrote to Clive Bell about their pending living arrangements:

I find London more and more disagreeable, and difficult to work in; and Carrington also wants to be in the country; so it appears on the whole a reasonable project. I shouldn't be able to face it alone; female companionship I think may make it more tolerable – though certainly by no means romantic. I am under no illusions. But in the present miserable, chaotic, and suspended state of affairs, it seems to me the best that can be done. (Strachey, *Letters* 367)

Gerzina and Holroyd give slightly conflicting accounts of the basic plan when it was finally agreed that Carrington and Strachey would live together. The scheme was for a few friends to rent a house for Lytton, who would be able to write there – they in turn as “shareholders” would be able to visit for weekends or use the house as a retreat from London. Holroyd explains that Oliver Strachey, Harry Norton, Saxon Sydney-Turner, Maynard Keynes and Lytton were “to put up twenty pounds a year in order to rent and maintain the place. This represented a subsidy to Lytton, who was to act nominally as caretaker and, with Carrington as housekeeper, live there permanently” (401), although Garnett is critical of this arrangement as “[t]he immediate success of *Eminent Victorians* made such an arrangement appear ridiculous” (*Great Friends* 155).<sup>28</sup>

However, Gerzina seems to question Carrington’s role as housekeeper by stating that “Lytton and Carrington planned to share the house, despite her own lack of funds, both in order to give her a place to paint and live independently, and to enable them to spend more time together” (94). In an endnote she then counters the views of Gerald Brenan, who apparently claimed that Strachey took a house and then invited Carrington to live there as his housekeeper, as well as of Aldous Huxley, who claimed that Carrington moved in to be Strachey’s “secretary and housekeeper”. The versions presented by Brenan and Huxley are quite comprehensible as Strachey more often than not downplays her role in the plan. He wrote to Maynard Keynes: “Have you heard of the scheme for a country cottage? Would you be willing to join? ... Oliver [Strachey, his brother] and Faith [Henderson] are going to take shares – also perhaps Saxon [Sidney-Turner] ... Oh,

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<sup>28</sup> Garnett also writes that “[i]n theory, Tidmarsh was to be a house where Lytton could live with Carrington economically and which members of the syndicate could visit whenever they wished. In practice it was Lytton’s house” (*Carrington* 86).



Carrington, too” (Strachey, *Letters* 325). It therefore seems quite understandable, yet not excusable, that Clive Bell and his mistress, Mary Hutchinson, “treated Carrington as a domestic” (Holroyd 464) and again it becomes clear that Strachey has a public discourse about his relationship with Carrington, which contrasts with their own private one it seems, as is discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

Yet when one examines their life together at Tidmarsh it is clear that in many ways it was conventional, and I suggest that one of the reasons for this is that they had little choice but to model their relationship on a heterosexual one such as their parents’ marriages. This was done with no small sense of irony as both of them were acutely aware of the differences between theirs and other “normal” relationships, and both Carrington and Strachey were extremely critical of their parents’ marriages. Thus their parody serves as a means of showing the fallibility of marriage as the ultimate expression of heterosexual love. Butler claims that “[t]he notion of gender parody [...] does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is *of* the very notion of an original” (*Gender Trouble* 188). Carrington and Strachey’s models, their “original[s]”, were two marriages which they saw as ineffectual; they were flawed and allowed them “a production which, in effect – that is, in its effect – postures as an imitation. This perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualisation” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 188) and it is within this framework that Carrington and Strachey attempt a relationship similar to marriage in which they not only resignify and recontextualise their fluid sexual and

gender identities, but in which they also critique the hegemonic concept of marriages such as their parents'.<sup>29</sup>

The first flawed marriage which I discuss briefly is that of the Stracheys. Between Richard Strachey and Jane Maria Grant there was a 23-year age difference; notwithstanding this difference they married in 1859 – the marriage was his second. Holroyd claims that they were “not an obviously well-matched pair. He, like most Stracheys, was rather short, highly methodical at work but of an abrupt social temperament; she was stately in appearance, and had more artistic interests. His influence with the children seems to have declined with time, while Jane Maria became increasingly the dominating figure within the family” (4). Holroyd also contrasts the letters Strachey’s parents wrote to him:

Terminating his short, impersonal letters in which the formality is relieved by drawings of odd botanical specimens to be seen at Kew, and which accompany mathematical booklets and packets of strange foreign stamps, Richard Strachey would sign himself ‘Your affnt father, Rd. Strachey’; while Jane Maria, spreading herself over far longer and more frequent letters, remained, even after Lytton was grown up, ‘ever darling, your loving Mama’. (4)

It was not only in his letters that Richard Strachey was somewhat diffident. “During the day, the old man seemed unaware of the terrific din from the swarms of creatures in

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<sup>29</sup> To a certain extent, Carrington and Strachey critiqued their parents’ marriages consciously. They, particularly Strachey, also expressed doubts surrounding the unconventionality of their relationship. Woolf relates a conversation she had with Strachey in her diary: “Perhaps after all, said Lytton, one oughtn’t to allow these attachments. Our parents may have been right. & so we discussed our parents” (*Diary: Vol. 2* 88).

spectacles, his sons and daughters. He sat through it unmoved, occasionally smiling affectionately[.] Leonard Woolf recalled in his autobiography, ‘when [the terrific din] obtruded itself unavoidably upon his notice, for instance, in some deafening argument one side or the other appealed to him for a decision. He was usually a silent man [but] ... extraordinarily friendly and charming’” (Holroyd 5). Despite this, “his father’s remoteness seemed to heighten Lytton’s admiration” (Holroyd 4).

Similarly Carrington also admired her father. Samuel Carrington went into service in India between the ages of 25 and about 55; he became known amongst the family as “the rich bachelor uncle from India” (Carrington, “Carrington’s early life” 502) and upon his return married Charlotte Houghton, some twenty years younger than he. According to Noel Carrington, he and his siblings found their father and the stories of his travels exotic and other-worldly, and their home was filled with ornaments and artefacts collected on these trips. Samuel was far more relaxed than Charlotte and was often seen as eccentric. Noel draws a sharp contrast between his father and mother when he describes his father as coming from a “cheerful, easy-going and spendthrift” family and having an “oriental code of hospitality” (Carrington, “Carrington’s early life” 502). Samuel had “always been unconventional in dress: equally in the friends he made and the standards he set. He was charitable and uninterested in gossip.” His children could not help noticing “those few old Anglo-Indian friends who visited him spoke of him with glowing admiration” (Carrington, “Carrington’s early life” 502). Gerzina claims that he “had no concern for the conventions of dress and religion and although he was a devout Christian, his faith

was shaped more by the Ten Commandments and the teachings of the New Testament than by public displays of piety” (7).

On the other hand, their mother took great pride in showcasing her family in the church by regularly leading them up the aisle to communion. As they grew older her virtues seemed less and less commendable. “She was obsessed at all times with ‘what people would think’. She was lame and rheumatic but indefatigable in doing what she conceived to be her duty, which was to oversee what her children and the servants were doing. On the occasion of the slightest lapse we would be reminded that she had given up everything to bring us up in a God-fearing way” (Carrington, “Carrington’s early life” 503). Charlotte the martyr “even admitted to me she married him [Samuel] out of pity because he wanted looking after”, Carrington wrote to Gertler (Gerzina 140). These differences between the characters of her mother and father made for an unhappy marriage and Carrington’s sympathies lay heavily with her father whom she loved and her mother whom she evidently despised. Gerzina writes the following concerning Carrington’s relationship with her parents:

Noel, Dora’s youngest brother, later wrote that ‘differences between parents were not voiced openly in front of the children, but they were sensed, and Dora built up a special image of her father’s noble qualities’. This loyalty to her father, whether or not based on an accurate understanding of his character, caused her to identify with his refusal to conform and to take his side in the unvoiced dispute between her parents. ‘When I used to make jokes

my Father always said, “That’s balderdash, nonsense, nonsense, gammon-&-spinach,” [Carrington] recalled, ‘and sometimes in a rage ended up, “not true, not true.” He was a fascinating character. It was a pity that he died, & that my Mother lived’.<sup>30</sup> (8)

Clearly Carrington felt as if she and her father were trapped by her mother, and the conflict between her parents affected her deeply – “she developed repugnance for family life as such. As her own friends in turn came to marry she was apt to treat it as a lapse from grace, with maternity an inevitable but none the less deplorable sequel for a person of intelligence” (Carrington, “Carrington’s early life” 505). It is these feelings that she made clear very early on in her sexual and romantic relationships. A letter to Gertler, written from her parents’ home, Hurstbourne Tarrant, shows her disgust at marriage after her sister, Lottie’s, wedding:

[Y]ou have no idea how terrible a real English wedding is. Two people with very ordinary minds want each other physically, at least the man does, the woman only wants to be married and have his possessions and position. To obtain all this they go through a service, which is comprised of worthy sentiments uttered by the old apostles and Christ! Many relatives come and friends all out of curiosity to see this presumably religious rite; afterwards they all adjourn to the house, and eat like animals and talk, and view each other’s

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<sup>30</sup> This was written in a letter to Gerald Brenan, 24 January 1924.

clothes and secretly criticise everyone and then return home. All this costs a great deal of money. [...] It's just like being in a bird cage here, one can see everything which one would love to enjoy and yet one cannot. My father is in another cage also, which my mother put him in, and he is too old to even chirp or sing. (Gerzina 66)

This cynicism is often humorous and incredibly sad, and gives an insight into perhaps one of the elements which seemed attractive in a possible relationship with Strachey. He did not want her “physically [...] [as] the man does”, and would place no demands on her. She in return did not vie for his “possessions and position” and seldom, if ever, made financial demands on him, and while venerating his position, did not envy it.<sup>31</sup> While he would send her tales of being “a weekend guest of Lady Astor at Cliveden, of Lady Desborough at Taplow Court, of Lady Horner at Mells Manor in Somerset” and of being “invited to luncheon-parties and dinner-parties by the celebrated hostesses of the day – Lady Colefax and Lady Cunard, Princess Bibesco and Lady d’Abernon” (Holroyd 433), he always returned from these glamorous forays to Carrington among “the ducks, geese, hens, rabbits, bees and kittens of Tidmarsh” (Holroyd 432). Carrington was not included in these invitations; according to Garnett, these famous hostesses “would no more have thought of including Carrington than of asking him to bring his housekeeper or his cook” (Preface 11). This allowed Carrington the freedom to pursue her own relationships with friends such as Augustus and Dorelia John, Nicholas and Barbara Bagenal, and other

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<sup>31</sup> I discuss Carrington and Strachey’s finances later in the chapter and show how Strachey supported Carrington, but also wanted her to be financially independent. Nonetheless, he was unfailingly generous towards her.

friends associated with the Slade. It was this freedom that she feared would be taken away from her if she was to get married. Instead, she continued to deride ideas of matrimony, often in comic ways.

Early in her relationship with Strachey, she played one of her practical jokes on him. A mutual friend had recently married and Carrington used this opportunity to mock marriage:

A completely new turn of events has occurred, James [Strachey, Lytton's brother] told Alix [Sargent-Florence, his partner] that George [Reeves] last time he saw him drew him aside, & with tears in his eye confessed that married life was a mistake he was not happy. He found she was full, & unintelligent after all... & he could not see his old friends as he used to, and – in short – he greatly regretted the whole business... so sir... what do you think of that sir? (3 August 1917)

Carrington, making the entire tale up, is playing a joke here with Strachey to which he responded “The George story amazes me. I really can hardly believe it” (4 August 1917), but a few days later he discovered “that the George story was a flam. Petite diablesse!” (qtd. in Gerzina 115). But one could claim that her disregard for marriage is evident from the extract as this is what she criticises as being “a mistake” and characterises it as a commitment which would prevent one from seeing “old friends” as suggested above. Ironically, this was never something which affected her in her own relationship with Strachey, which was much like a marriage. Before her legal marriage to Partridge, she

writes that “[b]eing married one is allowed to go off more alone” (28 July 1920) and one assumes that she is here referring to her “being married” to Strachey.<sup>32</sup> What are also elucidated in Carrington’s prank on Strachey are, once again, her scathing comments and feelings about women, as discussed in the previous chapter. She states that the woman was “full” and “unintelligent” and it echoes her sentiments concerning her future sister-in-law, Dorothy Partridge, whom she classed as being “too female & made everything serious ridiculous by her lightness” (20 March 1920).

While at times it appears that Carrington despised women, it seems that her dislike was informed by her desire to be a serious artist. According to Gerzina:

[Carrington] believed strongly that women could not have both marriage and art, and that if presented with a choice, she would select art every time. She had seen few marriages – certainly not her parents’ – which seemed worth sacrifice. While she was at the Slade this feeling against marriage began to grow into a positive aversion; as her female friends began to marry, she saw it as a lapse from sanity and intelligence.” (35)

In a letter to Brenan, dated October 1929, Carrington again deploras marriage and children and explores her lack of desire to conform to conventional norms:

One cannot be a female creator of works of art & have children. That is the real reason why so few women have reached any high plane of creators. And the few that did become artists, I think you will admit, were never married, or had children. Emily Bronte &

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<sup>32</sup> Carrington and Ralph Partridge were married on 21 May 1921.



her sisters, Jane Austen, Sappho. Lady Hester Stanhope. Queen Elizabeth, and even lesser people like the French female artist Berthe Morrissot, Le Brun, Julie de Lespinasse & Dudeffand. [...]

My real reason however is that I dislike merging into a person, which marriage involves, & I do *not* care for children. They seem too tedious & interrupting. I prefer the friendships of grown-up human beings. If when I am 38, I am not an artist, & think it is no good my persevering with my painting, I might have a child. But I doubt if I shall ever have maternal feelings enough to go through the bother & tedium of child bearing. Amen. [...] I *hate* those little self centred worlds which married people live in. (qtd. in Gerzina 163)

This letter raises several ironies, which I will discuss later, but first and foremost it shows Carrington's explicit dislike of children. She could not share Gertler's enthusiasm about the pregnancy of Ruth Humphries (Gerzina 65)<sup>33</sup> and in a diary extract talks of going to a dinner and the guests "making one a party to their conversations about money, children & life. I hated myself for not protesting & saying I think it's all very boring & your conversations about your children are just a pretext for talking about yourself – which to me would be more interesting" (9 January 1928). A few years earlier, she wrote to Strachey about her experience of Barbara Bagenal's pregnancy and childbirth, which led her to question "what is the female body made of? For she told me it took nearly 24 hours coming out, with acute pain all the time, in the end they had to pull with pincers. [...]

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<sup>33</sup> A Slade student who was a friend of both Carrington and Gertler.

next morning she woke up & had coffee, & eggs for breakfast, & now feels quite well!” She then goes on to describe the baby as “a Japanese grub in the cot” (15 November 1918).

Strachey himself never seems particularly enthralled at the prospect of children. He wrote to Virginia Woolf that he was leading “[a]ltogether a distracting life, and the comble was reached in the small hours of Friday morning, when the policeman’s wife who acts as a caretaker gave birth to a baby just outside my bedroom door” (Holroyd 463). In a contrasting discourse and in a far more entertaining tone, the next day he wrote to Carrington that “[t]he policeman’s wife gave birth to an infant. It all happened in the room opposite mine with the door open – imagine the sounds” (29 September 1919). Strachey was not entirely enchanted by the family life of Vanessa Bell and her children either – in a letter to Carrington he wrote of Quentin and Julian who “tend to come over and cover one with hay every five minutes, which is trying. But no doubt you would join them. Only just wait till you’re 65 with a red beard. [...] [E]ver your Grandpère” (16 June 1916).<sup>34</sup>

The irony that arises from her letter to Brenan above is that, despite this contempt for children, particularly on Carrington’s side, she habitually treated Strachey in a maternal

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<sup>34</sup> Strachey often characterises himself as being much older than his actual age, possibly due to his often-failing health. He sometimes used this to emphasise Carrington’s youth, as he does here where he relegates her to childhood by implying that she would join the children in covering him with hay. In actual fact, Strachey would have been 36 when he wrote this letter. In the following chapter I discuss ideas of kinship and examine the way Carrington and Strachey often addressed each other using familial terms.

Levy has edited this letter somewhat differently in his collection and quotes Strachey as writing “...tend to cover one with hugs every five minutes...” (qtd. in Strachey, *Letters* 304).

fashion.<sup>35</sup> At times he comes across as that very child who seemed “tedious and interrupting” and did in fact keep her from her painting, much as a child would have, yet she unfailingly indulged him. One could therefore argue that it was not entirely his fault that her artistic output suffered as Garnett has suggested.<sup>36</sup> Instead it is Carrington who was responsible for being less productive because of her relationship with Strachey; the onus was on her to prioritise and maintain her painting.

Garnett claims that “the men she loved and lived with after her breach with Mark Gertler cared little for painting. It did not occur to Lytton Strachey, or to Ralph Partridge, that her painting should be put first” and goes on to state that if there had been someone to work with her and encourage her, “her psychological blockage would have been overcome. But in her isolation it increased, and she became discouraged. I think that this was the greatest harm that Lytton did her, except by dying when he did” (Preface 13). If somewhat obliquely, Garnett seems to be suggesting that Strachey, by not “realising that her painting should be put first”, is responsible for her not becoming the artist, but I would argue against this. A more problematic account is given by Gerzina:

Carrington was quite willing to be recognised, but shyness prevented her from seeking publicity for her work. She had been working hard and steadily; though she did not win the Prix de Rome, she continued to work just as regularly. She overlooked chances to exhibit, although she did occasionally show at the New English, preferring instead to perfect her art privately. (66)

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<sup>35</sup> I discuss the notion of the Tidmarsh and later Ham Spray ‘family’ in the next chapter.

<sup>36</sup> Later in this chapter I discuss how supportive Strachey was of Carrington’s painting.

After she had fallen in love with Strachey, her aims for her work changed: rather than working for competitions or even exhibitions or even entirely for herself (although this last aspect remained important), she wanted to offer him the gift of her creativity. The following letter seems to highlight Carrington's desire to be an artist as she feels that this would allow her to showcase her love for Strachey: "Lytton, you give me such a happy life,' she wrote to him at the end of 1919 from her mother's house. 'One day I really hope I shall be an artist, & then you'll see my affection'" (Gerzina 142). Consequently she felt ineffectual in her demonstration of devotion as she often failed to see herself as an artist.

According to Gerzina, the primary art critics in the Bloomsbury group failed to give Carrington much recognition – "neither [Roger] Fry nor Clive Bell, enormously influential in British art circles, used his position as critic to forward her career" (68). Richard Shone, author of *Bloomsbury Portraits*, "didn't write much about Carrington in [his book] because [he] never felt there were close aesthetic affinities between her and the Charleston artists. Nor did they emerge from the Slade – which so obviously influenced Carrington for the rest of her life" (qtd. in Gerzina xxi). While her work was very different to that of the "Charleston artists" and was not post-impressionistic in the manner that Fry and Bell supported, Virginia Woolf did support her art. In her diary she notes that Carrington "looks at a picture as an artist looks at it; she has taken over the Strachey valuation of people & art; but she is such a bustling eager creature, so red & solid, & at the same time inquisitive, that one can't help liking her" (*Diary: Vol. 1* 153). Again on 19 August 1918 she writes that Carrington "[s]eems to be an artist – seems, I say, for in our circle the current that way is enough to sweep people with no more art in them than

Barbara in that direction. Still, I think Carrington cares for it genuinely, partly because of her way of looking at pictures” (*Diary: Vol. 1* 184). Woolf also supported Carrington by purchasing her art, and in the summer of 1919 “was about to make ‘a large showpiece by Carrington’ one of ‘the chief decorations’ at Monk’s House in Sussex” (Holroyd 449-450).<sup>37</sup>

Strachey in turn was incredibly devoted to her painting, writing her letters to ask “Will you do any painting down there, I wonder?” (23 March 1917). Once they had moved into Tidmarsh, she entered her most productive period of painting as they settled down to their routine: “Lytton read, wrote, or corrected proofs; Carrington painted and gardened and wrote her famous letters” (Gerzina 129). Woolf describes the home as such: “If I shut my eyes & thought of Tidmarsh, what should I see? Carrington a little absorbed with household duties; secreting canvas in the attic; [...] Lytton – a more complex situation. Good & simple & tender – a little low in tone; a little invalidish” (*Diary: Vol. 1* 311). During this period Carrington painted one of her most famous paintings, “The Mill House at Tidmarsh, Berkshire”.<sup>38</sup> Two years later, Strachey wrote to her:

But I must tell you at once – guess what – Simon [Bussy]<sup>39</sup> on your picture. He was... enthusiastic is not the word. – Looked & gazed, & talked and praised, extolled – on and on he went. ‘Better than anything at the London group’ – but that was by no means all. [...]

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<sup>37</sup> Woolf was also aware that such a public display of Carrington’s art would embarrass her and teases her when she writes “doesn’t that make you blush all over – upset the tea – and scald the cat?” (qtd. in Gerzina 146).

<sup>38</sup> According to Gerzina, this was painted in 1918 (131). The picture is currently (2007) on display at the National Portrait Gallery as part of an exhibition on Bloomsbury artists.

<sup>39</sup> Simon Bussy was Strachey’s brother-in-law, a prominent French artist.

‘[N]ot that it’s in the least an imitation – oh no! – but it has some of the same kind of charm’ – I only wish you could have heard him... There was no doubt about the genuineness of it all. ‘I am not a French complimenter’, he said in his curious English, and it’s quite true. At last, after he had been going on about it for half an hour, I really began to feel rather bored. Dorothy [Strachey]<sup>40</sup> also liked it very much. Jack too... So there’s no doubt that you’ll very shortly have to have a one woman show! (19 July 1920)

Carrington responded two days later:

Your letter made me so happy yesterday I read it over so many times. It is only I do care really so much more than I pretend to about what people think of my work. And I value the opinion of Simon particularly as he hasn’t any axe to grind. I meant he didn’t have to say something kind because I was present and also because he has seen so many pictures in France. Thank you very much for making me so happy. You know in a curious way one feels what one means to do and then when nobody sees it in one’s work and when Duncan & Vanessa liked not what I tried for, but for something else, I was confused. I tried so hard when I painted that Mill picture for a certain vision and I felt depressed afterwards because I thought I must have failed completely as no one saw. Only a small part of it did come off but that Simon should have seen that delighted me. (21 July 1920)

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<sup>40</sup> Dorothy Strachey was one of Strachey’s elder sisters.

Strachey's letter quite clearly shows not only his utter enthusiasm and excitement about Carrington's work, but also his pride when he encourages her to "have a one woman show". In the following letter he is also critical of Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell, showing the disjuncture between their work and Carrington's and again urges her to consider exhibiting her work:

And if you can paint in the intervals it's a great thing. [...] I think all you say about Simon's remarks are quite true. We must try to get him to come down again before he goes, don't you think? I rather feel D[uncan] & V[anessa] were not quite perfect critics – they tend to want you to be like them, and not like yourself – which is really the only thing it's worth anyone's while to be. Simon has the power of appreciating a great many different kinds of work. I asked him (to find out what he really thought) whether he thought yours was simply good student's work – pas du tout! – So you see you will really have to appear before the public! The advantage of that will be that all sorts of other people will appear who will understand what you're up to. – Very likely people one's never heard of, but they certainly exist. (22 July 1920)

When their new servant needed a room at Tidmarsh, Carrington proposed to Strachey that she move her painting equipment out of the library into the attic, but he was concerned about her work and raised objections:

I think so far as the Library goes, it all depends on what you think – viz. will you really be able to manage your painting satisfactorily in the attic? If you thought so it doesn't seem to me that there's any real objection, as the room is hardly ever entered by anyone else. But it is important that your painting shouldn't be hampered (qtd. in Gerzina 147).

Gerzina states that “[Strachey’s] success also made [Carrington] feel honoured by his good opinion of her own work, which she did not feel rivalled his. Lytton however consistently believed in the importance of her painting for its own sake” (Gerzina 148). He did not want household chores and responsibilities to detract from her painting. On discussing the help, he sent a letter saying: “I quite agree with you that it would be better if we could manage with only Annie, who is really charming, but can you teach her to cook? It would be fatal if all your days were spent in the kitchen” (4 August 1920).<sup>41</sup>

Despite this encouragement, though, Carrington’s first priority remained Strachey. Levy claims that Carrington and Strachey “intend[ed] to live together in the full (hetero)sexual sense” (xiv), but Holroyd qualifies this statement by claiming that “[t]hey had agreed to find a country cottage where they could spend part of their lives together. It was to be a commitment that would never exclude other emotional commitments, but give them both an androgynous enlargement of experience” (376). I would qualify this statement further when examining Carrington’s role in Strachey’s life and at Tidmarsh. In many ways she was androgynous, taking on both feminine and masculine qualities to see to his every

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<sup>41</sup> Strachey’s patriarchal attitude in this letter is evident in his assumption that Carrington should be the one to teach Annie how to cook, but I discuss this later in the chapter.



need, but Strachey was also party to this “experiment”, as I will discuss later in this chapter.<sup>42</sup> What followed was a bisexual woman and a homosexual man living together in a largely non-sexual relationship.

It is this “androgynous enlargement of experience” that becomes Carrington and Strachey’s attempt at an “overthrow of compulsory heterosexuality” which Monique Wittig suggests “will inaugurate a true humanism of ‘the person’ freed from the shackles of sex” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 19). Yet, while Carrington and Strachey clearly toyed with inverting stereotypical gender assignments, I don’t think either was consciously attempting androgyny; they were attempting a relationship and trying to complement each other’s sexual and gender identities. It is arguable whether Carrington was ever really “freed from the shackles of sex”. Strachey’s homosexuality, as well as the repugnance she felt for her female form, prevented her from having a sexual relationship with him. This placed complex limitations on their relationship and affected her other relationships with both men and women. Yet the very fact that she and Strachey adopted unconventional and rather fluid gender roles within the relationship allowed them to have a socially transgressive emotional attachment, one which allowed them other romantic and sexual partners beyond the confines of their apparent “marriage” at Tidmarsh.

As discussed earlier, Carrington’s role at Tidmarsh is a matter of some dispute, but when one examines what she reportedly did there it seems, that in their “married” state, she habitually took on a stereotypically wifely role, and this was undoubtedly underscored by

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<sup>42</sup> The use of the masculine and feminine binary is by its very nature indicative of a hegemonic and patriarchal society, but according to Butler, “they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilised through their parodic recontextualisation” (*Gender Trouble* 188).

her love and devotion for Strachey. Carrington was charged with finding them a house,<sup>43</sup> for which the lease was eventually signed by Oliver Strachey in November 1917. Carrington sounds like an excited child as she spent the rest of the year “in busy but excited preparations, including ‘raids’ for furniture, cookware, gardening tools, plants, and anything else she could find” (Gerzina 122). This all sounds remarkably feminised and portrays Carrington as a caretaker and nurturer, particularly when taking into account that “[e]verthing is packed with apples artichokes & potatoes instead of straw & paper! This method will probably insure all the china being smashed. But anyway the food supply is guaranteed for some months!!!” (20 November 1917).

She was not only in charge of the garden and growing their own food, but also presided over the kitchen. Holroyd recounts that “[t]hough she usually had a maid to help her, she did much of the cooking herself. She prepared large and delicious country meals for Lytton and his friends – home-made wines, game and raspberry jelly and good helpings of green vegetables from the garden” (407). There were lavish breakfasts at Tidmarsh; David Garnett remembers them as “[h]am and eggs, kedgerie or kippers, coffee, a large bowl of fresh cream just skimmed from the pans of milk, hot rolls, butter, marmalade, damson cheese and honey in the comb” (*Great Friends* 157). She even had a still-room where she made her wines:

Her cowslip wine was nectar, her sloe gin unequalled. Then the  
jams, bottled fruit and vegetables, chutneys, pickles, preserves. Her  
pickled pears were a revelation. The making of these was part of

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<sup>43</sup> Woolf acknowledges Carrington’s proactive approach in finding Tidmarsh. She writes in her diary that “[e]ven in the matter of taking Tidmarsh Lytton had to be propelled from behind, & his way of life insofar as it is unconventional, is so by the desire & determination of Carrington” (*Diary: Vol. 1* 236).

Carrington's secret life. [...] Sometimes things went wrong. Her first attempt at bottling broad beans led to a series of explosions and to the most nauseating smell. (Garnett, *Great Friends* 156)

Often behind the scenes in the kitchen it looked as if a bomb had exploded. It seemed a wonder that Strachey was not poisoned, and there were close calls – Barbara Bagenal once prevented Carrington from giving Strachey half a tumbler of neat iodine (Holroyd 407).

Carrington, however, gently began to invert the gendered domesticity in preparation for Strachey's arrival, before she became the doyen in the kitchen; she and a friend, Barbara Hiles, "stained floors, measured and laid carpets, and painted walls" (Gerzina 122), which one would usually associate with masculine responsibilities, from which Strachey recused himself. He wrote to Lady Morrell telling her of Carrington and Hiles's activities: "I really think the house will turn out quite a pretty one, though it won't be in proper trim till the warm weather. Carrington is most energetic [...] I (as you may imagine) am less so" (Gerzina 127). Not only that, but the work was of a fairly menial nature, which reflects their lack of money; it also underscores Carrington's need to personally satisfy Strachey's desires and she does so in a creative way, painting the walls of his room with a huge mural of Adam and Eve. She wrote to tease him of the "female favouritism [which was] rampant" (10 December 1979). However, in some ways it is clear that Carrington took on both masculine and feminine roles, both physically and linguistically. In Hampton's film, *Carrington*, when Strachey finally arrives at Tidmarsh bearing gifts of light bulbs, Carrington jokes that she "could carry [him] over the

threshold” and this scene reflects the division of labour between the two. It also shows Carrington parodying a marital tradition and perhaps sets the tone for their life together.

Despite her apparent contempt for conventional matrimony, Carrington on several occasions uses heteronormative institutions and practices as models for her relationship with Strachey. The recourse to heteronormativity often takes on the form of the two of them referring to each other in spousal and/or wedded terms, this despite their both being rather critical of the institution. Prior to her marriage to Partridge, she writes to Strachey: “Dear. I love you so much. Is it wonderful the way we always go on having adventures. Even in the decline & fall of our married days. Many hugs from your Mopsa” (20 August 1918). Referring to their “married days” shows that their language regularly reflected the way both of them, particularly Carrington, viewed their relationship. It also perhaps shows an underlying desire of Carrington to marry Strachey, and in a rather poignant manner she writes to him: “Dearest Lytton, Well if you don’t propose honourable marriage after you have read this letter, I’ve done with you!” (Carrington, *Letters* 92).

Virginia Woolf’s biographer, Hermione Lee, also refers to Carrington as Strachey’s “child-bride” (463), which shows that this was the common perception of her role and invokes a vocabulary which accurately defines their parodying a heteronormative institution. Unfortunately, Lee also refers to Carrington as “Lytton’s handmaid” (463), an understanding of their relationship which this thesis attempts to refute. Even Gerzina seems to hint at the married state when she says that “[Carrington] left a wifely note, pointing out arrangements made for him. It ended, ‘Orange in noble plates on side board.

Wood (cut) in greenhouse. Love for you inside yr Mopsa” (149). This, however, seems almost cursory when compared to the letter she wrote to him from Rothiemurchus:

If you thought it worthwhile to come bring 1) some knives, forks & spoons & the two big ones as I can't find many here 2) two sheets for yourself unless Bella will lend us some. There are masses of blankets 3) your sugar & mine,. Legg has both cards. 4) jam. V. important. There ought to be honey (some in the cupboard at Tidmarsh. Ask Legg). 5) some washing up cloths (ask Legg) 6) four towels. None here. 7) books 8) any companions if you think you'll be dull 9) my glosers green serge dress gailers from hall chest. Ask Legg to get these items for you – she knows where they are. And my old mackintosh from the hall peg. But ask Legg to post them if you don't want to carry much luggage & get her to cut sandwiches for you to take in [the] train. I leave everything else to your discretion. (13 July 1918)

Carrington comes across as rather maternal in her remonstrations towards Strachey, time and again taking on that role which she despised so much. As the following letter shows, she relished the role of playing his caretaker, asking “how is my aged granddad” (Carrington, *Letters* 54). She even mock-threatened him, which no doubt pleased him, as is revealed in the following letter:

Have you taken your sana-to-GIN, if not will you please do so at ONCE without further delay. If I find on investigation you have

dared to DISOBEY my commands. Henceforth be gone. I have done with you. [...] I shall never part with [drawing of stomach]. It is now mine. I feel like [a] strong man with electric sparks flying out. [...] Did you get the socks this morning at old Madame White-Fuz-Bush? Dearest Yahoo, Good morning. (8 November 1917)

The next day, she wrote to tell him: “Never again are you to behave like this! After November you will start a regular life at Tidmarsh, supported by glasses of milk, & vigorous walks” (9 November 1917).<sup>44</sup> Strachey seemingly endorsed this position of hers and writes to her in a flat panic:

My clothes have really now mostly vanished! It is ghastly. Have you by any chance got any? Of all those blue socks you mended, only one pair arrived here. Of all my silk underclothes, only one vest. Of all my blue vests, only one. Too shocking! Is it possible that my bag can have been rifled at the hotel in Exeter? I can't understand it – or perhaps in the train? Adieu for the present, chérie Mopsa. With love from Lytton (20 October 1918)

What makes this letter even more humorous is the fact that he writes it from his maternal home, Belsize Park Gardens! The letter indicates an intimacy between the two, but also highlights how reliant Strachey was on Carrington's ability to look after him. From Tidmarsh he wrote: “Where are my summer ~~pants~~ drawers?” (2 March 1919). Strachey

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<sup>44</sup> Carrington clearly believed in the benefits of Sanatogen and walks, and on more than one occasion sent Strachey reminders. Letters dated November 1917 were all written from her parents' home, Hurstbourne Tarrant. “Please start taking your Sanatogen instantly. I will send the grey muffler tomorrow & please get well soon. How I wish I could transport you here now this second – to take you with me for a walk over the hill. Dearest Lytton. You ought to be a little happy, as I love you so entirely. Your MOPSA” (18 November 1917).

was acutely aware of his dependence on Carrington and often approached their union rather tongue-in-cheek. As part of a charity gala, Strachey initially intended to write a play called “The Bugger Married”, a “comic view of his new domestic arrangement with Carrington” (Levy qtd. in Strachey, *Letters* 377), but, perhaps unfortunately, wrote “The Noble Savage” instead.

Carrington wears the wifely role well, writing to tell him not to “get ill. Do eat heaps of food, & go [for] long walks” (30 July 1917). Yet at times she satirised her position in Strachey’s life and does so in an exaggerated fashion. She resorts to sarcasm in her performativity of the “wife”, and in doing so distances herself from it and thus wittily subverts it. Upon making arrangements to meet him, Carrington writes “But I know you do it to tease me. So no more I’ll be there on Monday with tea & crumpets and yellow marigolds on a shining white cloth” (27 November 1918). From Regent Square she writes, “Keep well please. Change your socks. And don’t use the bellows – except for their proper purpose. Yr Mopsa xxx and yet another x” (22 February 1919). This latter, clearly sexual, reference indicates an acute awareness of Strachey’s homosexuality and teasing him in this humorous way shows the way in which she deals with the excruciatingly painful fact of him not being her lover.

While Carrington is poking fun at her role in Strachey’s life here, as well as their incompatible sexualities, one questions to what effect this was done. While their relationship does parody a heteronormative marriage in many ways, I agree with Butler when she calls into question “whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to

displace them; indeed, whether the denaturalisation of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms” (*Bodies That Matter* 125). Butler is arguing that by parodying these norms their existence is acknowledged and they are once again reinscribed. Yet Moya Lloyd argues that it is the “recitation of ‘heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames [which] brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the heterosexual original’” (198). I would like to suggest that parody in this instance does foreground the hegemonic norms, but it does not necessarily sanction them; rather, because these norms are imitated in a non-heterosexual relationship, their constructed nature becomes apparent and they are to some extent usurped for this very purpose.

Margaret Rose, in defining parody, seems to echo this when she says that “[u]nlike satire, the parody makes the ‘victim’, or object, of its attack a part of its own structure” (qtd. in Van der Merwe 6). Thus, heterosexual relationships are what Carrington and Strachey “attack”, but in order to do so, they subscribe to hegemonic ideology as a means to deconstruct it. They adopt heterosexual norms to showcase inherent flaws and inadequacies as a model for intimacy between male and female; they satirise, subvert, parody, but also at the same time mimic and live by conventional norms for their own ends. They are continually inverting and conflating their roles in such a way that they undermine not only the dichotomy of heterosexuality, but also the very idea of stable gender roles.

Both Carrington and Strachey are performative in their roles at Tidmarsh, and later at Ham Spray, in that they purposefully take on characteristics stereotypically associated



with a particular gender. Strachey usually ceded traditional masculine roles; this is possibly due to his playing with the notion of a homosexual identity, but a practical approach is essential when one examines the situation from his perspective. He was a very sickly man, frequently due to his “delicate digestive system” and “an unfortunate ability to pick up passing diseases” (Gerzina 65). “For much of his life he was ill – there were times when he was muffled in shawls and drank his Horlick’s malted milk at stated intervals” (Garnett, *Great Friends* 152), and often needed someone to look after him. He loved the attentive way which Carrington cared for him; while ailing at Asheham, he wrote her to “[i]magine the venerable Count, spewing into a basin, and gasping in agony, with no Mopsa to comfort for him!” (Strachey, *Letters* 391). Carrington also took care of Strachey after a bout of shingles; Woolf describes his reaction as quite melodramatic: “L[eonard] found Lytton with a swollen finger & 2 or 3 spots on his hand sitting over the fire, & only moving when enveloped in a silk tablecloth, & wrapping his hand also in silk handkerchiefs & complaining of the cold, & describing nights of agony when a pain like toothache seizes upon him & develops into frantic agonies only to be allayed by morphia” (*Diary: Vol. 1* 209) During this illness Carrington wrote to Virginia Woolf of her being “a ministering angel, hewer of wood and drawer of water” (Carrington, *Letters* 106).

It is important to take into consideration, though, that Strachey was not beyond taking care of Carrington when the need arose. Carrington had an operation on her nose after struggling with an inordinate number of “colds and swollen throats”, which were due to a

“defective nose” (qtd. in Gerzina 159). Typically she was not really concerned with the operation itself, but rather how it would impede her. She wrote to Brenan:

[The doctor] discovered I had bent the cartilage in the centre, & that until it was straight I would never get better. So next week I have to go into a hospital in LONDON, & have it cut out. I confess I am not looking forward to it. As it will make one rather weak & also increase, & ruin, my already too large nose. (qtd. in Gerzina 159)

After the operation, she left the hospital and returned to the Mill House, where she suffered severe headaches, and understandably felt sorry for herself. Holroyd reports:

Lytton also hastened back to take care of her – ‘so far I have induced her to keep in her bed,’ he told Ralph [Partridge]. ‘With rest and feeding-up (if these can only be administered!) I think she ought to be all right again before long.’ In less than a fortnight she was, with her usual energy, looking after Lytton. (475)

It was unusual for Strachey to be the “ministering angel”, yet it was certainly not a unique experience. While suffering from “the horrors of this loathsome disease”, Carrington wrote to say that “Mrs Bridgman [the housekeeper] has just brought me in a bowl of bread and milk, made very differently I confess to your Tidmarsh brew” (Carrington, *Letters* 115). Nonetheless, Holroyd seems to suggest that neither really enjoyed this role reversal; Carrington was dedicated to looking after Strachey and he enjoyed being doted on.

It is essential, though, to take into consideration that Strachey was entirely capable of looking after Carrington if need be, which dispels the idea that he was entirely self-serving in their relationship. Carrington wrote to him:

Do you remember those plaintive pen wipers made of red & blue felt with jagged edges with 'use me' embroidered in green on the cover. That's what I would like you to remember that I am always your penwiper. Mopsa XXX. (9 September 1919)

Strachey responded in such a way that he seems almost offended, if not disgusted, at the idea of having Carrington at his beck-and-call. He certainly did not endorse her proposal and wrote: "I'm afraid I'm a bother, and anyhow I don't approve of the pen-wiper theory" (n.d.).

However, Strachey generally inhabits a "traditional" gender role and he was quite often patriarchal, particularly in the role of the financial provider – frequently Carrington wrote to him telling him to write cheques, send money, etc., while she in turn offered to send things like bread to Charleston, where there were rations, and sugar to Garsington. Carrington is seen as active and indefatigable in everything she does, while Strachey is continuously seen as the provider, taking on the financial burdens after the success of *Eminent Victorians*.<sup>45</sup> In a letter to Virginia Woolf, Strachey writes:

Here I am in considerable agony. Nature turned crusty, the "pipes" congealed, and it has been so cold that my nose (to say nothing of other parts) dripped in icicles ... My female companion keeps herself warm by unpacking, painting, pruning the creepers,

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<sup>45</sup> *Eminent Victorians* was published in 1918.

knocking in the nails, etc... I try to console myself with Queen Victoria's letters... I still have the notion that I may be able to work in this seclusion, when all the nails have finally been knocked in. Nous verrons. [...] Ah dearie, dearie me. I am nodding over the fire, and she's sewing an edge to the carpet with a diligence ... Ah, la vie! it grows more remarkable every minute.  
(Holroyd 406)

What stands out from this letter is Strachey's amazement (and slight irritation) at Carrington's continuous activities, and his appreciation of them. He, meanwhile, is focussing on his research for his biography on Queen Victoria, which would later serve to support both of them financially, along with the royalties from *Eminent Victorians*.

Strachey found a publisher, Chatto & Windus, for *Eminent Victorians* once he had already moved into Tidmarsh; they paid him £50 on the day of publication which served as an advance on his royalties.<sup>46</sup> According to Holroyd, Strachey's average income in the 1920s "was between two and three thousand pounds per annum. The first use to which he put his money was the repayment of past loans [...] and the making of improvements to Tidmarsh – among them [...] the building of an earth closet in the garden" (430). Yet Strachey was quite frugal in some aspects; he wrote to Carrington chastising her and said:

Rather an unexpectedly large cheque arrived from the Athenaeum this morning. It was wanted. The 'books' have been terrifying. We must institute financial reforms. The outlook is dark. Don't you think the time has come to think seriously [about] beginning to

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<sup>46</sup> Holroyd calculated this to be £1150 in 1994 (409).

show your pictures? Unless you do, I don't see how you can hope to sell them – and that will really be essential, if you ever want to stand on your legs. (22 July 1919)

Yet with the sustained success of Strachey's writing career, he became increasingly generous towards her and I argue that this suited Carrington well, as it allowed her to take on so many other household tasks and responsibilities in order to care for Strachey; this naturally suited him too. He eventually bought her a car and her horse, Belle, and had a new studio built for her. He even paid for her and Partridge's honeymoon to Italy. One of the many tensions between Carrington and Partridge was caused by Partridge's tightfistedness. Long after their separation she wrote to Strachey to tell him of Partridge who "makes such a fuss about ever giving me money, that I'm resolved now to earn it & not ask him to pay my small bills" (24 August 1929).

As discussed earlier, Carrington took on quite a maternal role when it came to looking after Strachey, but at times it comes across as fanatical and reveals her lack of confidence in her abilities. According to Woolf, "Carrington [was] at her wits end, very naturally" (*Diary: Vol. 1* 209) during Strachey's bout of shingles. When a sick Strachey went to stay with Mary Hutchinson, Carrington furnished strict instructions:

I am sure you will be able to provide Lytton with so many more comforts – Clive says you have four handmaids to wait upon him! – than he gets [in] this barbaric house, that I feel I cannot tell you of much. But I will go through his day 8.30 breakfast in bed 2 eggs, toast, and jam *without pips* in it. If that is possible! – 11 ock

glass of hot milk with biscuits – Lunch his doctor recommends his having rice or macaroni as vegetable with meats. and milk puddings – Siesta in afternoon – tea at four o'ck – and so on till 10.30 when he has a bowl of bread and milk before going to bed – and a glass of milk with biscuits by his bedside in case he wakes up in the night – Lytton adds that you will then be required to sleep in the next room and wake at. one o'ck, two o'ck, five o'ck when he taps on the wall. and come in to bath his arm or sympathise with his groanings! – I will send him armed with his food books, and sugar. But really his wants are few, and as I said after this rude existence, and my appalling house management, and nursing, he is bound to be happy with you! [...] My constitution and appetite is that of an Ox, So nursing Lytton hasn't exactly impaired my health! [...] I am really so happy. Mary, that he is going to stay with you as I know you will care for him as noone else would. [...] I cant write proper letters like you written. But I only want to thank you rather especially for everything. With love yr affec Carrington.

(Holroyd 437)

What comes across quite clearly in this letter is Carrington's need to indulge all of Strachey's whims, which she clearly does, but still feels insecure, particularly when she refers to "this barbaric house" and her "appalling house management". What is also evident from this letter is Carrington's fear that others may look after Strachey better than

she did or could, thus making her dispensable – a horrifying possibility which would see Strachey finding all his wants satisfied elsewhere.

For this reason I would argue that Carrington, by devoting herself to looking after him, taking care of his every need, strips him of the need to pursue a homosexual relationship for any reason other than physical intimacy. If she took care of all of his needs, he would only need to find one of his young men to satisfy him sexually, as finding someone with whom he could mimic the intimacy he had with Carrington would be nigh impossible. Carrington wanted to be Strachey's lover and often expressed this desire in her letters, but realised it would never happen. In a letter to Brenan in which she explains her wish to paint like Uccello, she writes: "this desire [has] to do with my wish to have Lytton as a lover, a wish which the verriest goose could have known impossible" (Spalding 65).<sup>47</sup> One way which she could do this was to behave rather androgynously, tackling both traditionally masculine and feminine roles, as has been outlined in this chapter and elsewhere.

While these traditional masculine and feminine roles are based on stereotypes, so too is the perception which has been created of Carrington – perceptions which are often perceived as negative. In many ways she is responsible for the legacy that she has left behind. Garnett argues that "[j]ust as the picture of Lytton as an exhausted lily left over from the nineties is false, so is the view of Carrington as a country hoyden occupied in setting ducks' eggs under broody hens" (*Great Friends* 152). But this is indeed what she

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<sup>47</sup> According to Caws, this letter was written to Gerald Brenan the day before her marriage to Partridge, on 20 May 1921 (4). She married Partridge the next day in St Pancras.

spent a lot of her time doing. While she is frequently seen to occupy the role of what Taddeo refers to as “domestic drudge” (9), it is imperative to take cognisance of the fact that she chose this role for herself and in many ways undermined Strachey’s independence by pandering to him, creating the perception of him as being delicate and rather weak-willed.

At times he comes across as quite feeble in his actions, which he was not by nature. He was “often active, going for long walks on the Downs” (Garnett, *Great Friends* 150) and wrote about his trip to Bath with Carrington and of how “[o]ne bounds along those elegant streets and whisks from Square to Circus and Circus to Crescent! One almost begins to feel that one’s on high heels, and embroidery sprouts on one’s waistcoat” (Garnett, *Great Friends* 152). Yet his domestic abilities at Tidmarsh were severely hampered when Carrington was not there and at times he was quite ineffectual in his domestic duties. He wrote to tell her that he had tried to “[insert] the new ‘element’ into the cooking machine [but] it was a hopeless failure!” (Strachey, *Letters* 407). Incidences like this “brought home to Lytton just how much he had come to depend upon her in the indecipherable business of running the house. Without her help, he appeared lost – farcically and infuriatingly lost” (Holroyd 448). Holroyd recounts a particularly amusing account:

‘This morning I visited the butcher’s,’ [Strachey] wrote to James (7 April 1919), ‘and stood for some hours among a group of hags and every sort of “joint” and horror. At last my turn came, and I asked if they had any mutton – of the butcher’s wife. She said



“Yes”. I produced my coupon, on which she became rather mysterious, moved about, then brushed past me murmuring “wait a minute” in lurid tones. So I did. At last, on the departure of one of the hags, she said: “That was the food controller’s wife.” So I suppose we’d been committing some illegality, though what it can be I’ve no idea, as my principle is to understand nothing of such matters. (Holroyd 448)

Evidently Strachey had no desire to either understand or undertake domestic responsibilities, claiming them to be against his “principle[s]”; notwithstanding his reluctance, the fact that he is so out of his depth at the butcher indicates how seldom he took these duties upon himself, rather leaving them to Carrington. No doubt an incident like this reminded him of her indispensability. Holroyd relates another incident:

[Carrington] taught Lytton the art of picking vegetables for his meals, and how to weed while sitting in a chair. But whenever she left him there alone, he felt daunted by the magnitude of these tasks: peas were manageable, but ‘the beans frighten me’, he admitted, and the raspberries caught him in their nets. As for the hens, there seemed no possibility of catching one. ‘I am in favour of making them tipsy,’ he explained to her (7 July 1918), ‘-it seems to me, short of shooting them, the only plan.’ (431)

In some ways, Strachey’s inability to catch a hen and the fact that the beans frightened him make him seem like a rather weak character and emasculated in a sense – something which was the result of his dependence on Carrington as she humoured his delicacy and

made herself essential to his very existence. He in turn played up to these qualities in her presence. As Carrington was a gardener, cook, housekeeper, nurse, confidante and friend within the realm of this domestic space, Strachey had little need for a conjugal partner outside of his household.

Strachey was also aware of his emasculated image and wrote to Carrington, wishing self-deprecatingly that his “innards had been less jolty[.] Oh, to be a smiling Hercules” (1 September 1916). Strachey’s letters are often witty and amusing, and the very fact that he writes about his domestic incompetence concerning butchers and beans incites laughter in the reader, as it no doubt would have in Carrington. This very laughter is itself quite subversive as it indicates a self-consciousness about their relationship – they are to a large extent often mocking themselves and undermining the constructs of their respective gender roles – they are laughing at what is absent in their lives; that which they publicly despised, and which they privately desired.

Despite Strachey’s homosexuality and Carrington’s bisexuality, they were able to construct complementary gender roles – not necessarily ones which facilitated physical intimacy and desire, but ones which allowed them to express themselves and the love they felt for one another. I feel that what is of the utmost importance in reading their relationship is the presence of their mutual love which prevailed amid such unconventionality. While they were parodying a heteronormative relationship, such as that of their respective parents, and destabilising the notions of a gender dichotomy and accompanying heterosexual norms, it was not necessarily to make a political statement; it

was also because it allowed them to express their emotional desire for each other within their relationship and their sexual desire for others outside of it.

Lloyd points out that “gender [is] not an [...] expression of what one is, but gender [is] something that one does” (196) and when one reads the letters between Carrington and Strachey and gains insight into their lives together, one sees that it was filled with a self-consciousness of their own difference – an unconventionality which they in some ways deliberately constructed, humorously so, in order to parody and to a certain extent challenge that which they could not have. It allowed them to criticise the Victorian marriages of their respective parents as well as their associated morality and accompanying obligations; it allowed them the freedom to experiment yet maintain their own gendered identities which they themselves constructed within the limitations of a socio-political context; and finally it served as a means of expressing their mutual love and desire for a relationship which fulfilled them.

## **Chapter 4: Constructions of Kinship**

This chapter focuses on ideas of family and kinship and draws attention to the changes that took place when Ralph Partridge entered the Tidmarsh regime. I argue that Carrington and Strachey, while parodying a heteronormative relationship, also attempted to reconstruct the notion of a family in order to try and “normalise” their relationship. In the previous chapter I examine the way Carrington constantly tended to and nurtured Strachey, and how he supported her financially and emotionally. While I discuss this aspect of their relationship through the lens of gender parody, it is also useful to examine the relationship as adopting characteristics of the constructions related to ideas of family and affiliation. I examine traditional notions of kinship and look at how Carrington and Strachey, once again, conform in speech and actions to hegemonic institutions. However, the way they regard themselves as kin shifts over time and transmutes as their relationship evolves. Specifically, the changes chart the relationship and eventual marriage of Carrington to Partridge. At times they invoke configurations of kinship which resound with ideas of “descent” and at other times they rely on formulations of “alliance”. Anthropologists studying kinship have developed these two paradigms of descent and alliance in attempts to understand bonds between people. According to Borneman, descent is “organized according to principles of consanguinity or shared substance, and alliance on principles of affinity or marriage” (573).

The first form of kinship that Carrington and Strachey adopt is a permutation of descent, namely that of uncle and niece – terms of endearment which they assigned to each other

soon after meeting. This was often overlapped with the role of Strachey as (her) grandfather, while she would sign herself as “Votre grosse bébé” in her letters to him.<sup>48</sup> According to Gerzina, “[k]eeping their relationship on such safe, familial grounds could have been merely humorous, but it also could have been a subterfuge for both of them, for they were in many ways unprepared for the relationship that was developing, and for the stories that would soon be spread by the notorious gossipers of Bloomsbury” (75). I agree with Gerzina in that the use of familial terms could be seen as humorous, but clearly it is a humour arising from a playful self-dramatisation that can often mark the tentative, teasing beginnings of an intense relationship. This initial playing with roles and relationships signals, on a deeper psychological level perhaps, the striving towards clarifying the most fertile form of their eventual co-habitation. These familial terms are pervasive in Carrington’s and Strachey’s letters to each other, and are self-conscious yet undoubtedly affectionate and sincere. This continued referencing of one another as kin suggests a marked, and much needed, self-reassurance within their relationship – a means to understand this unconventional relationship which was beginning to form and for which neither one of them was prepared.

Certainly for Carrington, who was well known for being clandestine, it was a means of keeping this relationship a secret not only from her overbearing parents, particularly her mother, but also from Gertler, who would become, understandably, jealous of her friendship with Strachey.<sup>49</sup> Strachey too was reluctant to have his Garsington and

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<sup>48</sup> “Your big baby”, as directly translated from the French.

<sup>49</sup> Gerzina, in discussing the tensions which existed in Carrington’s character, claims that “she loved truth but constantly lied; she rejected her lovers, but continually lured them back; she was happiest

Bloomsbury friends realise the full extent of his friendship with a younger, middle-class woman and particularly one who was not regarded as being learned:

At school, Dora's work was indifferent except in natural history and art, but her great talent for drawing and painting was obvious to everyone. She later freely admitted that she was uneducated, and that much of that was her own fault; in her childhood she had had little interest in learning. She cheerfully confessed in 1921 that she had 'not been spoilt by education', even though her later efforts to become a well-rounded reader belie this admission. She got top marks in art and natural history, but, at the age of seventeen, her formal education in everything but art ended. (Gerzina 16)

However, Strachey's hesitancy and wariness regarding the opinions of others did not intrude on his relationship with Carrington. On the contrary, while he may have shielded himself and his relationship with Carrington from his friends and their public scrutiny, privately his letters to Carrington reveal a discourse which showed that he was growing increasingly fond of her and his affections are quite clear.

Soon after meeting, Strachey wrote to Carrington asking her to accompany Nick Bagenal, Barbara Hiles and himself on the trip to Wales:<sup>50</sup>

I hope you will have seen Barbara, and heard from her about Wales. Do you think you could come? It sounds as if it might be

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when she painted, but her painting frequently depressed her" (xvi). She further discusses Carrington's proclivity for secrets (14-15, 67, 88-89, 110-111).

<sup>50</sup> This trip, which has been discussed in every chapter, serves as a fulcrum in the relationship between Carrington and Strachey, as evidenced here once again.

pleasant. [...] [The] company will be she, Nick, and your grandpapa. Will you write and let me know what you think of it?

[...] You must come to Wales! (28 July 1916)

A few days later he wrote her another, somewhat flirtatious, letter again appealing for her to join him in Wales, saying that “of one thing be assured, we should all be quite *désolés* if you didn’t arrive in the mountains. They obviously wanted you to come very much; and as for me, I hardly feel as if I could bear it if you didn’t” (1 August 1916). What the correspondence shows are rather uncharacteristic appeals by Strachey to Carrington for her company, which is contrary to what is often perceived regarding their relationship. Carrington is often portrayed as being the one pursuing Strachey, and this is certainly the result of his writings to other friends about her in an understated and dismissive way. His entreaties to Carrington as quoted above reveal a distinct disparity when compared to his letter to Virginia Woolf telling her of his pending travels to Wales; he writes that he is “engaged ... to go [to] Wales then, with a small juvenile party” (qtd. in Holroyd 371). There is a definite absence of the enthusiasm and excitement which permeate his letters to Carrington; this absence is evident too in a letter to Mary Hutchinson, where he wonders “what the diable I am doing in this galère of grandchildren” (qtd. in Holroyd 371).

As readers of this correspondence, we see that, even within the private enclosure of letters, there was a need to signify the relationship between Carrington and Strachey in terms of familial bonds. At this time they were not involved romantically, certainly not

sexually, although some were suspicious.<sup>51</sup> Even their friendship as such was seen as odd. I suggest that one way of overcoming their perceived awkwardness within this relationship (Strachey's is quite transparent in his letters to Hutchinson and Woolf) was to resort to terms such as "grandpapa" and "votre grosse bébé". One of the reasons why Carrington and Strachey resorted to using such familial terms was that it allowed them to construct a relationship in which their affection and feelings of endearment could be vocalised sincerely, even if done so only in the confines of their letters. It also serves as a means which did not require them to disclose an intimacy which would make them both not only vulnerable to the "notorious gossipers" of Bloomsbury, but which they themselves were struggling to acknowledge.<sup>52</sup>

To their friends Carrington also wrote of Strachey using familial terms. Before the consummation of their relationship she wrote to David Garnett: "I am just going in a few minutes with grandfather Lytton to the Wolves den" (Carrington, *Letters* 47). During the summer of 1917 Strachey stayed with Carrington at 60 Frith Street and she writes to Barbara Hiles of the merriment in trying to convince "'Mrs Reekes, my housekeeper that Lytton was my uncle.' [...] Lytton found it 'curious this morning waking up with no virginal bodyguard at hand'" (qtd. in Gerzina 113). By referring to Strachey as her grandfather or uncle, she expresses her fondness for him, but the familial construct shrouds her true emotions. By invoking this vocabulary, they ensured that their

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<sup>51</sup> Woolf recounts the following incident: "[A]fter tea Lytton and Carrington left the room ostensibly to copulate; but suspicion was aroused by a measured sound proceeding from the room, and on listening at the keyhole it was discovered that they were reading aloud Macaulay's Essays!" (qtd. in Gerzina 127).

<sup>52</sup> It should be remembered that at the time Carrington was still involved with Mark Gertler, who would remain a looming presence for some time.



relationship made “sense” and could be explained in that both parties served as substitutes and objects for the other’s affection. By viewing each other as surrogate family members, they could rationalise and disguise what was occurring between them.

Such terms of kinship also served as a tie which bound them together when there was evidently so little else. As Gerzina claims, “[i]t was the contrast between Carrington and Strachey that made everyone so dubious at first: their ages, physiques, interests, not to mention sexual preferences seemed unbridgeable gaps to outsiders” (127). Despite what others would view as obstacles to a mutually beneficial relationship, both parties went on the trip to Bath and it was considered a success for two reasons. Firstly, Carrington and Strachey attempted their first sexual encounter, and secondly, they decided to find a house in the countryside where they could live together. These very material consequences of the trip demonstrate that Strachey was in fact sincere in his expressions of a strong desire to have Carrington join him, as is illustrated in the letters quoted above.

On their return, it is Strachey who seems to be far more sentimental and struck by his loneliness, yet he successfully manages to veil this with a humorous tone and rather dramatic prose:

Oh! I am feeling so desolate! Lunch is over, tea is over, dinner is over, and here I am lying in my solitary state on the sofa among the white cushions – silent, nieceless, sad! And you, I suppose, in the family circle, relating, ever more and more ingenuously, the details of your visit to Bab. [...] Indeed, indeed, it is all most

melancholy. But it was delightful while it lasted, and I'm so very glad that we managed to bring it off. (1 September 1916)

It is striking that Strachey invokes the idea of Carrington as his niece in this letter and it is within the context of her absence that he expresses his "solitary state" He also draws attention to Carrington being in "the family circle", which he in this instance was not part of. This could hint at an underlying desire of Strachey's to be a part of a "family circle" – preferably one which included Carrington. It appears that later that evening she responded, showing her appreciation for the time she spent with Strachey.

In contrast, Carrington was far more restrained in her first letters to him, yet her admiration for him is clear:

Dear Uncle Lytton, I feel burdened with so much affection and gratitude towards you tonight that I will pen you a letter whilst the inclination is heavy upon me. [...] Home! No discoveries! As I expected, the most utter boredom and peevishness. They suspected I was in London, and sent wires up there on Wednesday! [...] You are lying on your couch now, with its crochet background reading Gardiner. [...] I did enjoy myself so much with you, you do not know how happy I have been, everywhere, each day so crowded with wonders. Thank you indeed. (Carrington, *Letters* 38)<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Carrington, who was 23 at this stage, had gone to Wales without the permission of her parents as she herself had no chaperone.

She signs the letter “votre niece Carrington”, responding using the familial uncle-niece construction. She would continue to do this for a long time.<sup>54</sup> Two days later Strachey wrote to his “ma chère nièce” and signed the letter “your UNCLE” with a postscript: “It was very nice of you to come, and your company made all the difference to my enjoyment. I doubt if I shall get much further, bereft of your advancing spirit. The Caves of Cheddar – how shall I face them without my niece?” (Strachey, *Letters* 322-323).

One of the most noteworthy changes that takes place after the consummation of their relationship occurs in the familial discourse they invoke. It is after this juncture that Carrington and Strachey shift from appealing to a grandfather and (grand)child relationship to using the connection between uncle and niece. Herein lies a contradictory complexity. On the one hand, it appears to be a closer bond as they attempt to diminish the generational distance between themselves. On the other hand, they dispel the idea of direct descent; by referring to themselves as uncle and niece, they remain “related”, but there is a disruption with respect to consanguinity and they create a distance between themselves – one which is not necessarily incestuous.

This reveals a tension in their relationship, showing a personal and private conflict of how to proceed given their mismatched sexual orientations. Notwithstanding this discord, it is apparent from both Strachey’s and Carrington’s letters after the trip that theirs was an intimate companionship which both of them sorely missed when they left for their respective homes. There is also a touch of ruefulness, if not melancholia, which perhaps

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<sup>54</sup> For example, almost a year later she writes to him to say “O uncle o uncle. It will be good to see you again. Un mille embrassades. Yr loving Carrington” (30 July 1917).

hints at the unsuccessful attempt at a sexual relationship. One of the reasons for this was that such an intimacy was not sustainable because of their incompatible sexualities, but another reason, which Gerzina discusses extensively, was Strachey's embarrassment over his relationship with Carrington (125-126). Vanessa Curtis claims:

Strachey's friends viewed the idea of Carrington and Lytton as a couple with repulsion; it was considered extremely inappropriate. Even though it was evident almost from the start that they were to enjoy a platonic relationship rather than a sexual one, the relationship was the talk of Bloomsbury for several months. They were a curious looking couple: Lytton was tall and lanky, bespectacled with a curiously high-pitched voice, Carrington was short, chubby, eccentrically dressed and with daringly short hair.

(124)

No doubt because of Strachey's friends viewing the relationship with "repulsion" and as "inappropriate", he was at pains to explain the rationality of his decision to live with Carrington to friends within Bloomsbury. According to Holroyd:

[B]oth Lytton and Carrington had qualms about the Tidmarsh experiment. Already there was gossip. 'My plans for the future are quite devoid of mystery,' Lytton insisted to Clive. After describing the project in some detail, he ended up a little peevishly: 'This rather dreary explanation will I hope satisfy you that all is above board. Please don't believe in the hidden hand.' In the next few

months he was more than once called upon to provide this dreary explanation against rumour and conjecture. (402)

Despite this discomfiture and the “nervousness normally attributed to bridegrooms” (Gerzina 126), Strachey teasingly reprimanded Carrington for not finding them their country home: “‘Madame!’ he chastised her, ‘You fiddle while Rome is burning’” (Gerzina 115).

Carrington was, however, constantly looking for a cottage, but “[d]espairing of finding a cottage on her own, she and Strachey decided that she should disguise herself as a boy and, accompanied by her ‘Uncle Lytton’, roam the villages of southern England to find one” (Gerzina 117). Carrington writes:

Hours were spent in front of the glass last night strapping the locks back, and trying to persuade myself that two cheeks like turnips on the top of a hoe bore some resemblance to a very well nourished youth of sixteen. It’s an alarming spectacle seeing one’s self side view. I hardly ever have before. But dear, promise you’ll come even with a female Page for a companion. I think those cursed military authorities make the other rather more difficult, as the life of a village policeman is so drear, that the sight of a fat cheeked Boy and a German Bearded spy would throw him into a spasm of alertness and bring up all this stupidity surging into his gullet ... But the probability of us both being arrested the first night, *you* for the *offense* that I am not a disguised female, and me for the offense

that I *am*! But one might find out first whether it is a criminal offense. My love to you and write today please.” (Carrington, *Letters* 80-81).

The question Gerzina does not really address, though, is why Carrington and Strachey felt the need for her to dress up as a boy, but she does hint at the fact that Carrington was struggling to find a “cottage on her own”; perhaps they thought they had a better chance of finding a cottage being two. It is likely that Carrington, a single woman, would be seen unfavourably as a lessee. The idea of an unmarried couple consisting of a somewhat effeminate older man, who seemed even older, along with a young woman, who was a painter, would not have made them desirable tenants either, thus they might have decided to find a house as a family. For whatever reason, though, Carrington and Strachey never took this expedition upon themselves and Gerzina suggests this could have been due to “war-time difficulties” (117).

It could also have been too much of an outlandish plan for Carrington to dress up as a boy and publicly pretend that Strachey was her uncle. I surmise that Carrington, and possibly Strachey too, would have been reluctant to relinquish the “control” and order they had established with their familial constructions by displaying their very private relationship in the public realm, thus subjecting it to interrogation and possible criticism, or worse, ridicule. Already their relationship was beginning to manifest itself publicly, albeit in rather veiled ways. In December 1916 Carrington and Strachey spent Christmas at Garsington, where they performed one of Katherine Mansfield’s plays. “Carrington herself played Marcel Dash, the grandchild of Dr Keit, a part taken by Lytton. [...]

Aldous Huxley wrote [...] ‘Lytton [w]as an incredibly wicked old grandfather’” (Holroyd 381). The idea of kinship pervaded their lives, quite literally, in a public and performative manner.

Here too we see an example of the grandfather-grandchild construction, which draws attention to the fact that Strachey was much older than Carrington, a fact which he seems acutely aware of throughout his correspondence with Carrington. She shows little evidence of minding the thirteen-year gap – an age difference which is hardly noteworthy enough to warrant the verbal recourse to the relationship between a grandfather and his grandchild or an uncle and his niece.<sup>55</sup> It should be noted that Carrington is seldom, if ever, referred to as a grandchild – perhaps using that terminology would conjure images of Carrington being too young a possible lover and it would also invoke ideas of incest in this early part of their relationship, when their sexually experimental relationship was in the not-too-distant past, as I discuss later in the chapter. Using these terms would also rely on ideas of lineage and descent, one of the forms of kinship which anthropologists have suggested.

While Carrington and Strachey do rely on terms of endearment which revolve around ideas of descent, I argue that their kinship was one primarily bolstered by alliance, due to their similarity, empathy and mutual attraction towards each other. What underlies their relationship is the love and tenderness they felt for one another, emotionally and

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<sup>55</sup> See Chapter 3 (72 and 83-84) for a discussion on how Strachey often characterised himself as being much older than his actual age. Carrington, too, teased him about this.

practically, even physically. What Borneman says of another relationship is equally applicable and encapsulates the essence of what I am arguing:

The relationship [...] resembled neither marriage nor parentage, while containing elements of both over time. Their relationship was based neither on a set of communitarian foreclosures and essential exclusions – of sex or blood – nor on filling a lack through the incorporation of gender difference into a new unity. Rather, they were asserting a particular principle of voluntary affiliation: the need to care and be cared for. (580)

Within the domestic space of Tidmarsh Carrington and Strachey could indeed care for each other, as they did for seventeen years, fostering a relationship which certainly contained elements of both marriage and parentage.

Traditionally, marriage and parentage are what inform the conceptualisation of kinship, both morally and legally. One definition classifies family as “immediate family through marriage and offspring, living and cooking together as a single housekeeping unit, and one or more people related by blood, adoption, or guardianship” (qtd. in Holstein and Gubrium 897). When one examines the above-mentioned definition of family, it is evident that Carrington and Strachey do not qualify as a family because, while they lived together and shared mealtimes, there was certainly no consanguinity or legal contract between the two which bound them together.<sup>56</sup> However, Carrington and Strachey were a single housekeeping unit, with her doing a lot of the cooking – Garnett goes so far as to

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<sup>56</sup> The definition is clearly an outdated and reductive one, and it marginalises homosexual couples and common-law spouses at the very least.



say the kitchen was “her special province” (*Great Friends* 156); one may even argue that Strachey was a guardian to Carrington in that he provided for her financially and looked after her, as I discuss in the previous chapter. However, their lives were inextricably entwined, as evidenced in the following:

‘We have many projects,’ [Strachey] boasted to Clive, ‘to build a fireplace, a book-case, a theatre, to learn Spanish, to attach the pump to the mill-wheel by a leather band, to buy 24 geese, to borrow a saddle from Farmer Davis and saddle the Blacksmith’s pony with it and ride into Pangbourne, to write a drawing-room comedy, a classical tragedy in the style of Euripides, and the History of England during the War. But le temps s’ev va, mon cher, and we are left idling in front of the fire.’ (Holroyd 416)

The fact that Strachey refers to Carrington and himself embarking on these projects shows that their lives were lived in intellectual, physical and emotional communion with one another. It also reveals the simplicity and comfort of their lifestyle – something which clearly suited them both and a reader gets the distinct impression that Strachey is writing about a household in which there is cooperation and codependency between its members.

Instead of more formulaic or legalistic concepts, I turn to the notion that “the parameters of family are established in terms of networks of care and cooperation, not formal kinship designations” (Holstein and Gubrium 897). Judith Stacey acknowledges that people have “creatively and resourcefully ‘remade’ contemporary family life into other varied, fluid,

and unresolved arrangements” which she calls “brave new families” (qtd. in Holstein and Gubrium 895). While Stacey is referring to “contemporary” family life, it is clear that the domestic and familial relationship between Carrington and Strachey is one which is “varied, fluid, and unresolved”, particularly the way they continually reconstruct notions of the family at Tidmarsh. To that end, Carrington and Strachey’s relationship undergoes a number of transformations during their seventeen years of cohabitation as their relationship begins with their using the concept of grandfather-grandchild or uncle-niece, and I discuss how they also use formulations of brother-sister and parent-child. While none of these formats is representative of their relationship, not least of all because their relationship was often changing in nature, they show an attempt to reconfigure and adjust a love which seems to undermine conformist ideas of the family. Carrington and Strachey are brave in the sense that they usurp these traditional notions for their own purposes, albeit largely in the private space of their home. Despite being affiliated with the rather avant-garde society of Bloomsbury, they faced resistance.

This resistance was largely hypocritical when one considers that, despite open relations and affairs which challenged and experimented with all forms of unions in terms of sexual desirability and identity, many so-called Bloomsberries succumbed to a life which was publicly more conservative and derided those who established more progressive relations. Woolf writes: “I like & think I understand [Strachey’s] feelings – even in their more capricious developments; for example in the matter of Carrington” (*Diary: Vol. 1* 89). The fact that Woolf refers to Carrington’s and Strachey’s relationship as “capricious” shows her disdain. Other evidence of Bloomsberries engaging in conformist

relations can be found when one takes into account how many of them settled into becoming conventional families. Angelica Garnett reflects on her family, and by extension ideas of family in Bloomsbury, in her autobiography *Deceived with Kindness*:<sup>57</sup>

Bloomsbury believed in and largely practised intellectual tolerance, but often failed to recognize the power of the emotions or the reasoning of the heart. Fascinating and vital, they hid their feelings behind an apparent detachment that I found at that time repressive and confusing. (vii)

Essentially what Garnett says is that, while Bloomsbury was fairly accepting and open-minded, this was often only in intellectual, theoretical pursuits as discussed within the confines of various outposts such as Gordon Square,<sup>58</sup> Monk's House,<sup>59</sup> Garsington,<sup>60</sup> Charleston<sup>61</sup> and Tidmarsh. Notwithstanding their freethinking ideologies, often they themselves succumbed to practices which elided their liberal beliefs. Here I think Carrington and Strachey were two of the exceptional members, who never compromised

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<sup>57</sup> Vanessa Bell remained married to Clive Bell while he was having an affair with Mary Hutchinson. She meanwhile lived at Charleston, Sussex with her bisexual partner, Duncan Grant and his lover, David Garnett. Vanessa and Grant conceived a child, Angelica (Bell) Garnett, who grew up believing that her father was her mother's husband, a pretence which was upheld for seventeen years.

Another capitulation was the "sensational marriage" of Maynard Keynes to Lydia Lopokova. Despite various homosexual affairs, primarily with Duncan Grant, Keynes married Lopokova. "Bloomsbury was 'shocked'. How could Maynard, Lytton wondered, have attached himself to this 'half-witted canary' who bobbed and flitted about the furniture, chirruping away and failing to conceal her incomprehension of the English language. Whatever could have possessed poor Pozzo? He actually seemed to be in love with her – and she with him! It really was quite extraordinary!" (Holroyd 555).

<sup>58</sup> This was home at various time to almost all associated with Bloomsbury, including the Stephens family, E.M. Forster, Katherine Mansfield, Maynard Keynes, James Strachey, Alix Sargent-Florence, Duncan Grant, David Garnett, Saxon Sydney-Turner, and Nicholas and Barbara Bagenal, as well as Strachey. Partridge and Carrington lived there too both before and after their marriage.

<sup>59</sup> The home of Leonard and Virginia Woolf near Lewes, Sussex.

<sup>60</sup> The home of Philip and Ottoline Morrell in Oxford.

<sup>61</sup> The home of Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and David Garnett in the rural Sussex downs.

on the “power of the[ir] emotions or the reasoning of the heart”.<sup>62</sup> Rather they (re)conceptualised ways to justify their relationship.

One of the familial constructions they adopted is that of siblings. While there is perhaps not as much evidence for this model as there are for others, the following example highlights the ironies of their relationship and hints at either an element of denial in their relationship or a taking for granted of their rather unconventional relationship. Carrington was busy reading Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals, which she found “too intimate & exciting” and wrote to Strachey telling him about it:

I thought in many ways it was so like our life [referring to William and Dorothy Wordsworth] and I loved them both so much. For the way they sowed broad beans and she darned socks & he read Shakespeare to her. But I fear I cannot recall that I ever baked bread & pies and copied out neatly your verses. (21 July 1920)

The next day Strachey wrote back saying:

I looked into Dorothy’s journal, before you went, and was entranced. Amazing people! And I agree with you that they seem to have had the supreme sense of forestalling in many essentials the great Tidmarsh regime. (22 July 1920)

Both of them seem to be quite self-congratulatory concerning their “Tidmarsh regime” and Carrington draws attention to the warm domestic space which she created for herself and Strachey – a space in which Strachey plays the role of the intellectual and she that of

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<sup>62</sup> They were sometimes highly hypocritical, though. Strachey was especially duplicitous concerning Keynes’s marriage to Lopokova (Holroyd 555).

the one who tends to his needs, and together sowing broad beans, almost exactly the way Dorothy Wordsworth relates her life with her brother, William, in her journals. Carrington chooses to focus on her shortcomings; she does not seem to remember that she had already in fact “copied out neatly [Lytton’s] verse” in a manner of speaking. Strachey wrote to her in March 1918 asking her to make corrections in *Eminent Victorians*. He asked her to look at his notes, written in the flyleaf of his own copy, and to write these out and mail them to Chatto and Windus (Strachey, *Letters* 389), thus taking on the role which she ascribed to Dorothy Wordsworth and self-deprecatingly denied herself at the time.

In their relationship Carrington and Strachey evinced elements of affiliation, in the way they cared for one another, and they incorporated models of descent into their relationship, such as that of between grandfather and child, uncle and niece, and obliquely they referenced a sibling relationship and noted the similarities with themselves. By using filial relationships and those of descent, they also steep themselves in the incest taboo. Descent and affinity are seen as counter-concepts – “the former lacking sex, the latter requiring it” (Borneman 578), and any relationship which inhabits spaces of both affiliation and descent is fraught, particularly in terms of sex. “[A]dults are to enjoy both principles simultaneously as privileged relationships with culturally specified (gendered, sexed and age-graded) categories of persons – so long as it is not with the same person” (Borneman 578). Carrington and Strachey were a woman and a man living together in a household where they cared for each other and mimicked heterosexuality, but because of their incompatible and/or fluid sexual orientations, they

eventually pursued sexual affairs with others after their own flawed attempt at a heterosexual relationship. Their relationship shifted to accommodate what it was they each needed from one another, and these included elements which are often provided within the context of a consanguine family.

The dynamics in the relationship altered with the appearance of Major Reginald Partridge at Tidmarsh.<sup>63</sup> He was a friend of Carrington's brother, Noel, and they were together at Christ Church, Oxford, before the war. Hermione Lee describes him as "a large, blue-eyed young man, who, after a conventional Anglo-Indian upbringing and education, a heroic war, and great prowess as a rower at Oxford, had now fallen under the spell of Carrington" (462). Carrington seems to have been quite indifferent towards him in the beginning, but gradually she began to thaw. Initially she found that he had "only the most banal conversations"; he "'improved' with time, even though he still sometimes lapsed into long and boring conversations" (Gerzina 144-145). This indifference was noticed by Woolf who states that Carrington was a "little ashamed of P[artridge]" (*Diary: Vol. 2* 63). However, Carrington seems to have become intrigued by him gradually and wrote to Strachey saying "RP was rather good at lying" (qtd. in Gerzina 145).

Carrington was obviously hesitant and wary of Strachey's reaction to a possible disruption of their life together and wrote to tell him of her meeting Partridge in a rather measured manner:

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<sup>63</sup> Partridge was known as Rex for short, but Strachey disliked the name and renamed Partridge Ralph (Holroyd 732). I discuss the significance of this renaming process towards the end of the chapter.

Partridge shared all the best views of democracy & social reform – wine & good cheer & operas. He adores the Italians and wants after the war to sail in a schooner to the Mediterranean Islands and Italy, and trade in wine without taking much money, and to dress like a brigand. I am so elated and happy. It is so good to find someone who one can rush on and on with, quickly. [...] Fortunately he is to be in England 3 months. So I hope I shall see him again. Not very attractive to look at. Immensely big. But full of wit and recklessness. (Carrington, *Letters* 99)

Strachey was intrigued at the prospect of the young man. According to Holroyd, “Lytton felt a flutter of interest. ‘The existence of Partridge sounds exciting,’ he wrote (6 July 1918). ‘Will he come down here when you return, and sing Italian songs to us, and gesticulate, and let us dress him as a brigand? I hope so.’” (445).

Unfortunately, the first meeting between the two men did not go well, as Partridge was quite aggressive concerning conscientious objectors. He was unaware of Strachey’s status as a conscientious objector and thus ignorant of the fact that the visit rankled – “Carrington was embarrassed and Lytton appalled” (Gerzina 138). Partridge was oblivious and wrote to Noel Carrington that he had been initiated into Tidmarsh:

“[A]s a great part of the [festivities] took place on the river, I viewed the proceedings very favourably. Old man Strachey with his billowing beard and alternating basso-falsetto voice did not play a great part.” (qtd. in Gerzina 138)

Despite this poor first impression, Carrington continued to see Partridge and Strachey soon began to develop his own attraction towards him and wrote that “I really like him more than anyone else – he seemed so modest; but I wish he had rather more forehead” (qtd. in Gerzina 148). Partridge would often arrive at Tidmarsh of his own accord. Holroyd charts the intensifying emotions as such:

Immediately the war was over, Ralph Partridge returned to Oxford, where he was supposed to be completing his law studies and from where he would bicycle over the twenty miles to Pangbourne for weekends. He had fallen in love with Carrington, and she felt pleased by his attentions. He was “not very attractive to look at”, she had warned Lytton, his face reminding her “of a Norwegian dentist”. [...] Yet secretly she had taken to him strongly and so, to her surprise, had Lytton. (446)

For the first few months Carrington was at pains to keep her budding relationship with Partridge separate from her life with Strachey. One reason could be because she didn't want to disturb that lifestyle and was upset when Partridge intruded on her time with Strachey. After one particular visit from him she wrote a letter to Strachey lamenting the former's presence, saying: “[N]ow you've gone I am dreadfully sorry that I didn't see more of you. I am furious that the poor Partridge came, & ruined two evenings, and a walk” (qtd. in Gerzina 147). She refers to him as “the poor Partridge” which reveals that she did in fact have feelings for him and chooses to understate them in this rather obvious fashion, yet there is a clear ambivalence and even confusion surrounding her pending



emotions towards him. In many letters to Strachey, written soon after she met Partridge, she avoids discussing her feelings. Carrington also writes in this same letter quoted above that “I had to write immediately to tell you that I was in love with you [Strachey]” (qtd. in Gerzina 147), thus using the opportunity after Partridge had been there to reaffirm her love for Strachey. With this letter we begin to see how Carrington saw the two relationships as completely different and independent from one another, yet she realised that these two men would have to accept each other, or rather that Partridge would have to accept Strachey, if he wished to remain her suitor and sexual partner.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Carrington saw to Strachey’s every requirement at home, thus the only desire he needed satisfied outside of the domestic space was a sexual one.<sup>64</sup> Conversely, Carrington too needed a sexually intimate relationship and she seems to represent her relationship with Partridge in this deliberately sexual way:

Then the young men swam in the pond. [...] Goldie<sup>65</sup> was completely bowled over by the major’s blue eyes and pursued me with questions about him!!! Ottoline now raves about his appearance, and even Alix. [...] I remain adamant and admit – to you – that his thighs are elegant, his private parts enorme [*sic*], his deltoids as white as ivory – but his face, the face of a Norwegian dentist. (9 June 1920)

While Carrington enjoyed speaking to Partridge, it is clear that she was immensely attracted to him, despite comparing him to a “Norwegian dentist” and a “chest of

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<sup>64</sup> See Chapter 3 (93).

<sup>65</sup> Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson.

drawers” (11 May 1919). It is the sexual aspect of her relationship with Partridge which she seems to emphasise in her letters to Strachey,<sup>66</sup> and she draws particular attention to his attractiveness as experienced both by herself and others. Perhaps this was done in an effort not only to convey to Strachey that she was having a sexual relationship, but also to reassure him that she was not wholly dependent on him and that she did not resent him for not being able to grant her the physical intimacy she craved.

It even seems as if she exaggerates the sexual attraction between her and Partridge; she wrote to Strachey, after painting a nude of Partridge, in which she “confess[es] [she] got rather a flux over his thighs, & legs. So much that [she] didn’t do very good drawings” (qtd. in Gerzina 146). Eventually she succumbed to this temptation:

Drawing the bud Partridge in my studio was not without its bass accompaniment this afternoon.<sup>67</sup> It was slightly Russian, like a short story. He is so naive and young. I felt like some mature hag boosted up with a complete knowledge of mankind!! All the while

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<sup>66</sup> Interestingly, in a letter to Gertler she does not mention her attraction to Partridge at all. She writes of him as such:

This young man [who] thought himself very advanced and yet was so self satisfied, and narrow minded, as to simply dismiss with a few cynical phrases any variety of mankind who he didn’t agree with. A certain callousness, and lack of reverence for life, and death appalled me. They neither of them felt any passion or interest in things like we do. They discussed their futures and weighed the advantages and disadvantages of certain professions. But there was no desire to do any creative work of their own. (Carrington, *Letters* 125)

The contrast between this letter to Gertler and her letters to Strachey foregrounds how she emphasises Partridge’s attractiveness to Strachey and does not really seem to focus much on how irritating she found him as a person. It also reveals, no doubt, that she was still reluctant to be completely honest with Gertler regarding her relationships. A few days later she again wrote to Gertler, saying “I don’t take much to the young man” (Carrington, *Letters* 131).

<sup>67</sup> Gerzina edits the letter differently as “the bird Partridge” (146), which does seem to make more sense.

Mrs Mason sang below, and churned her plates, the Mill creaked round and at intervals the water came crashing into the tank from the pump below. He is so accomplished, and as smooth as any ebony table. [...] But gordie, gordie, when he talks about Oxford and the doings of those young men, UGH! I see it means a large bed in that cottage at Marsland if one is to put up with him for a fort-night, and painting all day long so that one doesn't have to talk. (Carrington, *Letters* 138)

From this letter one can see that Carrington deliberately emphasises, for Strachey's edification, that her liaison with Partridge was primarily a sexual one; for all her other needs Strachey sufficed. In fact at times she comes across as quite opportunistic, particularly when she writes:

There's no denying that the Major with all his dullness is in the Shakespearian use of the word 'A most excellent bed fellow'! If only as in the story of Psyche he appeared every night, & was invisible by day! (qtd. in Gerzina 148)

In this manner she downplays her growing emotional relationship with Partridge and is at pains to inform Strachey of her irresolution regarding the liaison. While she portrays her and Partridge's relationship as being primarily sexual, it is clear that they were becoming emotionally attached to each other as well, yet she tries to conceal this from Strachey. She was "anxious that her love-making with Ralph should not affect their relationship" (Holroyd 461), probably because she didn't want Strachey to feel that their life together at Tidmarsh was being threatened in any way.

Carrington writes to Strachey that she had received a “gloomy letter from la major” and that she “had better abandon that business” as she confessed her “incompetence to deal with him”. She ended the letter by saying to him “But you have no interest in it” (28 October 1919). Nonetheless she was enamoured of Partridge and wrote to Strachey a few days later:

Today I felt rather wrecked and almost forty years old. I say do you mind if La majora comes over on Sunday to till our soil. He seemed so lonely, and bleated so winningly that I gave in. I will keep him on the potato patch so you won't hardly notice him. (31 October 1919)

Strachey, however, had noticed Partridge and indeed had an interest in him, and his feelings grew for Partridge in the same way that Carrington's did. In fact, he appeared to be jealous of Carrington. He wrote to her, wondering “if the major is with you now – I expect so, as I can't fancy that any railway stoppage would deter him” (2 October 1919). Here we see an acknowledgement from Strachey of the sexual intimacy between Carrington and Partridge.

Nonetheless, Strachey did not hide his own attraction to Partridge, particularly not from Carrington. She and Partridge had set off for Cornwall and, before departing, the latter left Strachey a basket of raspberries. Strachey wrote to Carrington (11 July 1919):

How kind it was of the Major to think of providing me with that final basket of raspberries! They were indeed heavenly. I suppose he would be shocked if I suggested that you should give him a kiss

from me. The world is rather tiresome, I must say – everything at sixes and at sevens – ladies in love with buggers, and buggers in love with womanisers, and the price of coal going up too. Where will it all end? [...] Not that *I* am in love with anybody – oh, no! no! a thousand times no... [...] This is a ridiculous letter, I quite realise that, but I am in a ridiculous mood. – Discontented, slightly – isn't it preposterous? What on earth have I to be discontented about? 'Oh Mr Strachey! So successful! So brilliant! Such a future! Such a past!' – And a week-end at the Wharf, besides. – All the same, to be a rowing blue, with eyes to match, and a 24 years old! – Ah! That would be something! But I perceive you're all splashing about in the stream so that I'm getting very little attention. (Strachey, *Letters* 444)

Again, we see that Strachey seems to have felt decidedly left out of the relationship between Carrington and Partridge. While he draws attention to the rather absurd nature of this triangular relationship, he is fairly melancholic concerning the fact that his love for Partridge is not only unrequited, but that he cannot reciprocate Carrington's love and is therefore, to some extent, alienated from their mutual happiness. While Strachey clearly realised his ridiculous thoughts, given the domino effect of the relationship (Carrington was devoted to him, and Partridge to her and therefore he had, in a sense, secured the latter), the tone of his letter is quite sulky towards the end.

Partridge, while becoming increasingly fond of Strachey, was certainly not interested in him sexually. Holroyd claims that “Partridge was exclusively heterosexual. Indeed, his mind ran much on women, many of whom adored him; and he had many romantic conquests, especially among actresses and chorus-girls. Yet Strachey seemed to like him all the more for this” (Holroyd 446-447). Frances Partridge<sup>68</sup> refuted the idea of a sexual relationship between Partridge and Strachey and said “Lytton quickly realised that Ralph was ‘completely heterosexual’ and that any other kind of relationship with him was a ‘no go’” (154).<sup>69</sup> Gerzina continues:

Imagining that the three lived in a sort of free-love ménage à trios simplifies what was a much more complicated triangle. Ralph certainly grew to love Lytton, and their friendship was very deep and warm. They called each other ‘dear’ and ‘darling’ in letters and met on intellectual grounds. Theirs was an extremely strong and mutual affection which sometimes excluded Carrington because she was a woman. Lytton could tell Ralph things of a sexual nature which he felt he could not confide in Carrington, but this did not mean that their own relationship spilled over into the sexual realm. (154-155)

The letters and diaries of Carrington never seem to indicate that she felt threatened by a burgeoning relationship between Strachey and Partridge; what they do show is her

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<sup>68</sup> Frances Marshall was Partridge’s mistress and married him after Carrington committed suicide.

<sup>69</sup> Partridge made a number of homophobic comments and these “potentially humorous remarks about sexual relations between men” (Gerzina 143) obviously riled Carrington. She had written to tell Strachey about how these comments were “rather amusing but spoken – all wrong” (qtd. in Gerzina 143), but she was more forthright to Garnett: “Mr P. asked me if I had read ‘Despised and Rejected’ and also made a louche joke about Lytton and Buggery. But I don’t think all the same there is anything between him [Partridge] and Brennan” (Carrington, *Letters* 105).

attempt to construct two relationships which were carefully demarcated in terms of emotional and physical needs.

In allowing Partridge to become a permanent feature at Tidmarsh, Carrington was continuously deferential towards Strachey and it is with this shift in the domestic dynamic that Carrington and Strachey begin to adopt the familial reconstruction of her looking up towards him as a father figure, whom she began referring to as “Fakir” (Carrington, *Letters* 141) and he “adopting” both her and Partridge as his children. Both biographers draw attention to this shift, as I demonstrate. Holroyd, in writing about Strachey’s travels writes that “[t]his time he would be travelling without ‘the children’, Carrington and Ralph, and leaving behind an explosive situation” (480).<sup>70</sup> Gerzina too writes that “[Carrington] saw [Strachey] as father and mother to his own works and in many ways to herself” (148). Peter Dally also describes Carrington as such: “Dora Carrington had fallen in love with Lytton as a young woman and devoted herself to him, looking after him, an inseparable daughter” (151). Strachey himself on several occasions refers to Carrington and Partridge as his children. He wrote to Partridge: “I went for a perfect walk yesterday with Virginia.<sup>71</sup> Oh, for a great farmhouse here, with many large panelled rooms and a walled garden, and barns, and horses for my two children, and a pianola, and multitudes of books, and a cellar of wine, and... but my imagination runs

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<sup>70</sup> Holroyd also raises the issue of Bloomsbury’s uncertainty concerning Partridge; apparently “Bloomsbury was sceptical too about his role in the Tidmarsh ‘family’, and recoiled from his intrusions into Gordon Square” (480-481). Here, Holroyd also draws attention to the constructs of kin.

<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, Woolf also refers to Strachey as a father figure. She writes in her diary: “Lytton very amusing, charming, benignant, & like a father to C[arrington]. She kisses him & waits on him & gets good advice & some sort of protection” (*Diary: Vol. 1* 171). In September 1922 Woolf comments: “Both [Carrington and Partridge] weigh upon poor old Lytton who feels himself in the position of a father[.] [H]e is slightly in love, yet sees, with his usual candour, all the faults & drawbacks” (*Diary: Vol. 2* 201).

away with me. Well! Some day it may occur!” (qtd. in Holroyd 476). This is a familial construction which Carrington mirrors when she writes of attending a play: “Don’t you think you, and your children might have a prolonged birthday treat and go there for it?” (Carrington, *Letters* 155).

As another birthday treat, Carrington and Strachey had a tradition of writing poems for each other and the following poem was written on Strachey’s birthday. The fact that it is addressed “To both D.C. & R.P. March 1<sup>st</sup> 1920” shows that Partridge was certainly part of the Tidmarsh fold and it is representative of the fact that Strachey was seen very much as the epicentre of their life together and valued both of them:

Suppose the kind Gods said ‘Today  
You’re forty. True: but still rejoice!  
Gifts we have got will smooth away  
The ills of age. Come, take your choice!’

What should I answer? Well, you know  
I’m modest – very. So, no shower  
Of endless gold I’d bet, no show  
Of proud-faced pomp, or regal power.

No; ordinary things and good  
I’d choose: friends, wise and few;  
A country house; a pretty wood



To walk in; books both old and new

To read; a life retired, apart,  
Where leisure and repose might dwell,  
With industry; a little art;  
Perhaps a little fame as well.

At that, I'd stop. But then, suppose  
The Gods, still smiling, said 'Our store  
Of pleasant things still overflows.  
Look round; be bold; and choose some more.'

Hum! I should pause; reflect; then 'Yes!'  
Methinks I'd cry, 'I see, I see,  
What would fill up my happiness.  
Give me a girl to dwell with me!

A girl with genial beauty dowered,  
A healthy and vigorous liberty,  
By supreme Nature's self empowered  
To live in loveliness and glee,

And clothe her fancies with fair form,

And paint her thoughts with vivid hue;  
A girl within whose heart, so warm,  
Love ever lingers – oh, so true!’

Enough! – But hush! – if once again,  
Once more, the Gods the gates of joy  
Threw wide, and bade me take! – Ah, then  
I’ld whisper ‘let me have a boy!

Yes, yes, a charming boy, whose soul  
With tenderest affections flows;  
Young, yet not too young – the rich whole  
Of manhood blooming in youth’s rose;

Gentle as only strength could be;  
With something of a Grecian grace,  
And – sweeter, fairer still to me! –  
The loved light of an English face.’

(qtd. in Gerzina 156-157)

Within the poem it is significant to note that Strachey clearly values both his “children” and refers to them quite specifically in the diminutive as a “girl” and a “boy”. Carrington is seen as a beautiful “girl” who brings Strachey much joy in her constant enthusiasm and he also draws attention to her life as an artist. Significantly, he mentions Carrington first,

and then Partridge, who is characterised as charming and tender, and standing on the threshold of manhood. Clearly he sees both of them as being much younger and more youthful than himself.

The familial paradigm of Strachey as being paternal towards his two “children” becomes especially clear when one examines the circumstances surrounding the engagement between Carrington and Partridge. Partridge began to place pressure on Carrington to marry him, but she was resistant to marriage for a variety of reasons. I discuss these in the previous chapter, where I argue that she detested the notion of marriage and, partly because of this, parodies heteronormativity. The reasons include Carrington’s desire for independence and privacy, her reluctance to have anything or anyone disrupt her life with Strachey, and her fear that marriage, as well as children, would detract from her life as a painter. Partridge was insistent though: “He wanted more from her; she wanted her life to continue just as it was. This made him unhappy, which she could not bear, but neither could she see a solution. She would not marry him, as he wanted, because she felt he wanted to possess her” (Gerzina 160). Carrington also seems to have struggled with the very idea of having both Partridge and Strachey in her life and confided in the latter about her affections:

You can’t think how your letter delighted Ralph telling me not to be a fussing hen. He is so fond of you. I shall be glad too when the voice of Labour speaks. It’s very unnerving for him having no occupation. I feel sure it would make so much difference to things. Oh Lytton, how difficult things are. I wish I hadn’t such plural

affections. The worst of it is I sometimes feel I could grow attached to almost anybody [...] if I lived with them which works very badly when other people [...] want one conclusively. I wish I could see how to manage it. It makes what otherwise might be so happy always slightly overshadowed. [...] Dear Lytton, I think of you so often. This week I shall hope to paint at Kentmere. Simon's praise still cheers me so much.<sup>72</sup> I send you my love and a kiss.

(5/6 August 1920)

This letter demonstrates that Carrington was very fond of Partridge, but she felt pressurised by his desire to marry, and she seems to ascribe this pressure, certainly in part, to the fact that Partridge was out of work. It is also the beginning of a tense period between the three and Carrington's letters in particular reveal distress, as well as a subtle shift in which her affections for Strachey become slightly more muted.

While Carrington declares her love for Strachey, she does so in a manner which resounds with desperation; she is not as affectionate or loving as she usually was. Rather she draws attention to their "friendship" and takes comfort and refuge in him as such. This is demonstrated in the following letter:

Ralph seems so happy & more like he was in those old days than I ever remember him since. He says his old feelings to you have now come back and he takes such pleasure in Tidmarsh ... My love dear friend. (5 September 1920)

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<sup>72</sup> For a discussion on Simon Bussy's praise of Carrington's art, see Chapter 3 (75-78).

When looking at Carrington's letters to Strachey, this rather subdued salutation is in stark contrast to her usual assertions of love and devotion. It is during this period that she increasingly characterises herself and Partridge as Strachey's children:

You will exclaim & admire when you see the labour your children performed for you this last weekend. We picked every plum off every tree, Ralph dug up all the potatoes & even picked the nuts. [...] I don't miss you, or anyone, as you hardly seem to be real or to exist – in this mad hectic world in which I live! [...] I still haven't quite recovered from the agitations – mental decisions – of last week but this last weekend did a great deal to making me think it will all be for the best. He has altered so much. All his domineering ways have vanished & he was so entirely affectionate & so genuinely delighted with Tidmarsh. But it is a great comfort to have your advice & friendship. ... Honestly, to have your friendship seems to me to have the whole world. My love to you. Your C. (7 September 1920)

The letter is written from Tidmarsh and it is significant that Carrington characterises both herself and Partridge as Strachey's children in the garden at Tidmarsh performing labours which would be seen to benefit him. In doing this Carrington begins to construct a domestic environment in which she and Partridge are self-sufficient. She also begins a subtle delineation of her and Partridge – a couple – as Strachey's children, but in her own "single" capacity she refers to Strachey as her friend. It echoes with the revelation that she doesn't miss him and this comes as a surprise to the reader. While this statement is in

all likelihood made tongue-in-cheek, it shows that she is attempting to reconcile herself with Partridge's desire for joint domesticity, but she was still rather resistant to marriage.

She made sacrifices to this end and she and Partridge embarked on a pre-marital experiment, deciding to live at Gordon Square in London during the week and at Tidmarsh over weekends. This did not satisfy her at all. Carrington resented the arrangement and complained to Strachey:

My dearest Lytton, I feel dreadfully depressed now, installed high up in this gloomy grey Square. The beauty of that walk made me long to be in the country again. [...] I love the smell of fallen poplar leaves and the loveliness of the coloured trees and Tidmarsh so passionately: I can't write what I feel. [...] Perhaps you thought I didn't care leaving you this morning. [...] Oh God. *You* said the middle of the week would go so quickly, but the weekends, they go quicker far. And I saw so little of you... Yet I must try honestly to forget now that I have given my promise to stay here with him. Perhaps in a few weeks I will either numb some senses or realize I cannot bear it. He is so good to me. He tries to make me happy. But I have to hide my pain, which makes it harder. For I do miss you so frightfully. Promise this, dear to me, if you feel it matters to you, my being away, if you feel ill, and worried to write and tell me. [...] Next weekend we will talk a little together. You will tell me how you feel. Oh wasn't it a wonderful talk this morning. I see

you now crawling under the fence on your hands and knees like a mild red bear in spectacles, in the orange leaves.<sup>73</sup> [...] You mustn't think I am not happy here. It's only I had to tell you and you alone, how much I cared. Oh Lytton, why should it be so difficult? Write to me, but say nothing of this. (Carrington, *Letters* 166)

Carrington resented Partridge for not allowing her to stay in her beloved countryside with Strachey and appeals to the latter to give her a reason for not residing in London with Partridge; it appears Strachey never obliged her on this score. The letter also reveals her sheer frustration, not only at having to stay in London with Partridge, but also the very fact that she had to make compromises in order to satisfy a partner who made demands on her. She despised having to concede her independence and “the pleasure of being able to breakfast at 7.30, wander about aimlessly, do numbers of stupid things, eat fried eggs, & currant cake at every meal & never talk to anyone all day ... man was not made to be united or merged into another person. As the handles of the scissors” (qtd. in Gerzina 166). This lack of independence and solitude was a problem which was not, and could not, be resolved by wedlock as neither party was willing to negotiate. She wrote to Brenan: “[t]he married state is *not* a good one and I *won't ever* get married so there. And that's a TRUTH of great importance” (qtd. in Gerzina 165). Gerzina underscores this theory:

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<sup>73</sup> Garnett inserts a footnote at this point to explain that the reason Strachey was crawling under the fence was so that he and Carrington could be alone together.

[A]ll would have been well had Ralph not been more determined than ever to have her as his wife. She steadfastly refused, and he took his problems to Lytton. Lytton could not bear to see either of them unhappy, and found himself in the position of the wise counsellor; indeed, Carrington referred to herself and Ralph as Lytton's 'children', and thanked him for his wisdom on both sides. He managed to cheer Ralph a great deal, for he at first advised patience with the assurance that Carrington would slowly come around if not pressured. (162)

However, pressure came from a rather unexpected corner: Woolf wrote to Vanessa Bell "words which were to start an inexorable chain of events: 'We've got Carrington and Partridge for the weekend. Dont [*sic*] you think it would be a good thing to bring about a legitimate union?'" (Gerzina 163). Partridge had begun working at the Hogarth Press and this seemingly gave him the confidence to renew his marriage proposals to Carrington, but he was underhand in his tactics and to a certain degree manipulated Carrington into agreeing. Gerzina suggests that one of the main reasons Carrington capitulated to marriage was her fear of losing Strachey. Hermione Lee accounts for the events prior to the engagement as such when examining the role that the Woolfs played:

At the first crisis between Ralph and Carrington (who could not bring herself to leave Lytton), in the spring of 1921, Virginia liked being confided in. [...] Perhaps carried away by being 'in the thick of it', or working off some smothered jealousy over Lytton's love



for Carrington, or not thinking carefully enough about her, she gave Ralph the impression that Lytton did not care much about Carrington and would be quite happy to have her out of his life. Leonard, meanwhile, brutally advised him to ‘put a pistol’ to Carrington’s head.<sup>74</sup> So he did, telling her everything that Virginia had said; and Carrington, very wretched, wrote a poignant letter of renunciation to Lytton, and gave in to Ralph’s bullying. Virginia said later that she felt ‘slightly responsible for that marriage’. (463)

Webb makes this suggestion too when she writes that “Virginia, on her part, also made the mistake of involving herself in Lytton, Carrington and Ralph’s *ménage à trios* at Tidmarsh, which led to confusion, hurt feelings and Carrington’s eventually marrying Ralph in May” (64).<sup>75</sup>

The merits of this proposition are not under investigation in this thesis, but what is of importance is Carrington’s reaction, as well as Strachey’s. Both of them are at pains to express a mutual love in the letters which followed between them; Strachey seems to not want any disruption to his life, particularly the retreat of Tidmarsh, while Carrington

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<sup>74</sup> Leonard Woolf saw Carrington as “one of those mysterious inordinately female characters made up of an infinite series of contradictory characteristics, one inside the other like Chinese boxes” (qtd. in Holroyd 484).

<sup>75</sup> Woolf recorded the following in her diary on 15 May 1921:

By this time I think Carrington will have made up her mind one way or t’other. She must have had an odious Sunday. But still she must make up her mind. So I told Ralph on Friday, broaching that topic after all these months of silence. He did it himself, rather, by telling me of his gloom of the night before: his loneliness. ‘I wished for my mother’ he said. ‘Though she irritates me, & I could tell her nothing.’ He was very shrewd & bitter about C[arrington]. ‘She thinks herself one of the little friends of all the world’ he said. Then he said she was selfish, untruthful, & quite indifferent to his suffering. So people in love always turn & rend the loved, with considerable insight too. He was speaking the truth largely. But I expect he was biased; & also I expect – & indeed told him – that he is a bit of an ogre & tyrant. He wants more control than I should care to give – control I mean of the body & mind & time & thoughts of his loved. There’s his danger & her risk; so I don’t much envy her making up her mind this wet Whit Sunday. (*Diary: Vol. 2* 118)

feared that her marriage to Partridge would in effect mute her love for Strachey. She was under the impression that if she lost Partridge, she would lose Strachey too; this is evident in the following lengthy letter. I have quoted the letter extensively as I feel it gives a fairly comprehensive overview of the relationship between Carrington and Strachey, but it also offers insight into the reasoning behind Carrington's decision to marry Partridge. The letter, dated 14 May 1921, was written five days before her marriage to Partridge and at the time Strachey was in Italy:

My dearest Lytton, There is a great deal to say and I feel very incompetent to write it today. Last night [...] I wrote an imaginary letter and bared my very soul to you. This morning I don't feel so intimate. *You* mayn't value my pent up feelings and a tearful letter. *I* rather object to them not being properly received and left about. [...] Ralph had one of his break downs and completely collapsed. He threw himself in the Woolves' arms and asked their sympathy and advice. Leonard and Virginia both said it was hopeless for him to go on as he was, that he must either marry me, or leave me completely. [...] I'd really made my mind up some time ago that if it came to the ultimate point, I would give in. Only typically I preferred to defer it indefinitely and avoid it if possible. You see I knew there was nothing really to hope for from you [...]. Then Alix told me last spring what you told James. That you were slightly terrified of my becoming dependent on you, and a permanent limpet and other things. I didn't tell you, because after

all, it is no use having scenes. But you must know Ralph repeated every word you once told him. [...] He told me of course because he was jealous and wanted to hurt me. But it altered things, because ever after that I had a terror of being physically on your nerves and revolting you. I never came again to your bedroom. Why am I raking all this up now? Only to tell you that all these years I have known all along that my life with you was limited. I could never hope for it to become permanent. After all Lytton, you are the only person who I have ever had an all absorbing passion for. I shall never have another. I couldn't now. I had one of the most self abasing loves that a person can have. You could throw me into transports of happiness and dash me into deluges of tears and despair, all by a few words. But these aren't reproaches. [...] And I know we shall always be friends now until I die. Of course these years of Tidmarsh when we were quite alone will always be the happiest I ever spent. [...] I know we'll be better friends, if you aren't haunted by the idea that I am sitting depressed in some corner of the world waiting for your footstep. [...] I saw the relief you felt at Ralph taking me away, so to speak, off your hands. I think he'll make me happier, than I should be entirely by myself. [...] And as Ralph said last night you'll never leave us. Because in spite of our dullness, nobody loves you nearly as much as we do. So [...] I said I'd marry him. [...] I'd probably never marry anyone

else and I doubt if a kinder creature exists on this earth. Last night in bed he told me everything Virginia and Leonard had told him. Again a conversation you had with them was repeated to me. [...] Virginia told him that you had told them [...] you were nervous lest I'd feel I had a sort of claim on you if I lived with [you] for a long time, ten years and that they all wondered how you could have stood me so long and how on earth we lived together alone here, as I didn't understand a word of literature and we had nothing in common intellectually or physically. [...] Virginia then told him that she thought I was still in love with you. Ralph asked me if I was. I said I didn't think perhaps I was as much as I used to be. So now I shall never tell *you* I do care again. It goes after today somewhere deep down inside me and I'll not resurrect it to hurt either, you, or Ralph. Never again. He knows I am not in love with him. [...] I cried last night Lytton, whilst he slept by my side sleeping happily. I cried to think of a savage cynical fate which had made it impossible for my love ever to be used by you. You never knew, or never will know the very big and devastating love I had for you. How I adored every hair, every curl on your beard. How I devoured you while you read to me at night. How I loved the smell of your face in your sponge. [...] Say you will remember it, that it wasn't all lost and that you'll forgive me for this outburst, and always be my friend. [...] Ralph is such a dear, I don't

feel I'll ever regret marrying him. Though I never will change my maiden name that I have kept so long – so you mayn't ever call me anything but Carrington.

*3 o'ck Saturday,*

PS I've just read this letter again. You mustn't think I was hurt by hearing what you said to Virginia and Leonard and *that* made me cry. [...] I only cried last night at realising [...] that some times I must pain you, and often bore you. You who I would have given the world to have made happier than any person could be, to give you all you wanted. But dearest, this isn't a break in our affections. I'll always care as much, only now it will never burden you and we'll never discuss it again, as there will be nothing to discuss. I see I've told you very little of what I feel. [...] Once you said to me, that Wednesday afternoon in the sitting room, you loved me as a friend. Could you tell it to me again? Yrs Carrington.

(Carrington, *Letters* 175-178)

Strachey's response to this heart-felt letter was written the night before the marriage of Carrington and Partridge, but it appears that he only sent it the day after their wedding. One cannot help but wonder what Carrington would have decided if she had received it before the time, as it quite directly indicates the unreliability of the information which she used, and which Partridge used to influence her decision. It is also one of the few letters in which Strachey is quite forthcoming about his feelings for Carrington:

I hope by this time you will have had my other letters – though I am afraid they may have seemed a little inadequate. [...] But I hope that in any case you never doubted of my love for you. Do you know how difficult I find it to express my feelings either in letters or talk? [...] [S]ometimes it seems to me that you underrate what I feel. You realise that I have varying moods, but my fundamental feelings you perhaps don't realise so well. Probably it's my fault. [...] Oh my dear, do you really want me to tell you that I love you as a friend! – But of course that is absurd, and you *do* know very well that I love you as something more than a friend, you angelic creature, whose goodness to me has made me happy for years, and whose presence in my life has been, and always will be, one of the most important thing in it. Your letter made me cry, I feel a poor old miserable creature, and I may have brought more unhappiness to you than anything else. I only pray that it is not so, and that my love for you, even though it is not what you desire, may make our relationship a blessing to you – as it has been to me. [...] [I]f there was a chance that your decision meant that I should somehow or other lose you, I don't think I could bear it. You and Ralph and our life at Tidmarsh are what I care for most in the world – almost (apart from my work and some few people) the *only* things I care for. It would be horrible if that were to vanish. You must not believe, too readily, repeated conversations. [...]

Certainly, I thought it was generally agreed that one didn't quite believe everything that came through Virginia! As for the physical part, I really think you exaggerate that too. I find that in those things I differ curiously at different times, and what I said to Ralph on that occasion I can't remember, and I think it may have been a passing phase. [...] [Y]ou seemed in your letter to suggest that my love for you has diminished as time has gone on; that is not so. I am sure it has increased. It is true that the first excitement, which I always [...] have at the beginning of an affair, has gone off; but something much deeper has grown up instead. So far as I can judge, I believe you are right, and that if Ralph wants marriage it is best for you and for him that it should be so. But I hope that (apart from his happiness) it *won't* make much difference to anybody! [...] Oh! My dearest dear, I send you so very much love! I feel happier now that I have written, and hope what I have written will seem as it should be to you. [...] From your own Lytton. (493-494)

In their constant reassurances to each other, particularly the days surrounding the wedding, Strachey is seen very much as a paternal figure in action. The day before the marriage took place Carrington wrote to reassure Strachey:

Everything is so happy now & R is charming. So you mustn't be worried about your children. [...] You can't think how happy your

letters made us both you really never realise how much we both in  
our separate ways love you. (20 May 1921)

Partridge also signed this letter, and wrote “Ever so happy now – Ralph”, showing (perhaps even asserting) his continued presence in the relationship between the three. After the wedding, Carrington and Partridge went to Paris for their honeymoon and then they joined Strachey in Italy. Strachey paid for this honeymoon and therefore on a materialistic level took on the role of the father.

That Carrington and Strachey spent their honeymoon with Strachey is itself quite strange, and could certainly have proved a strain, yet, in a sense, it was a way of reconfiguring, re-triangulating their love, in preparation for their lives together at Tidmarsh. However, this happiness was short-lived. Partridge, working for the Woolfs, needed and wanted to stay in London, while Carrington longed for the country at her beloved Tidmarsh. Soon after their wedding, Carrington began an emotional affair, at the very least, with Partridge’s friend, Gerald Brenan. Hermione Lee writes the following about the Partridges’ extramarital affairs:

By 1922 Ralph’s marriage was ... in trouble. Carrington had become involved with his ex-fellow officer, Gerald Brenan, a romantic and eccentric character who, after the war, had got away from his repressive family to live and write in a remote Spanish village. Brenan had fallen extravagantly in love with Carrington in England in the summer of 1921, and had begun an affair with her in the spring of 1922. Meanwhile Ralph was making love to



Valentine Dobrée ... whom Carrington was herself very attracted  
to. (464)

According to Holroyd, the affair began even sooner than 1922: “Over her honeymoon Carrington wrote four long letters to Gerald. Ralph nearly always went through her correspondence, she explained (8 June 1921), so if Gerald wished to write her a love letter ‘put a red stamp on the outside upside down,’ she advised, ‘then the faithless wife can conceal it before he reads it.’” (488). Carrington seems to have accepted her role as a mistress and wrote to Brenan: “Ralph will tell you I am a poor mistress, & make promise of being an ill-favoured wife” (qtd. in Gerzina 171). Partridge’s affair with Dobrée was not his first dalliance,<sup>76</sup> but “it seemed to mark the end of their marriage of less than two years as a sexual and social convention” (Gerzina 189).

With the dissolution of the marriage after roughly a year, the familial constructs broke down too.<sup>77</sup> Despite Partridge spending his weekends at Tidmarsh, the three seldom reverted to referring to each other using any form of familial bond. Rather, they were left with the constructed identities which were fostered years earlier. It seems to me that all three parties were disappointed and disillusioned; after all, they were so familiar with resorting to self-fashioned identities, particularly linguistically. All three of them went by other names and, while this could be viewed as a coincidence, it reveals that all three

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<sup>76</sup> Woolf remarks in her diary that “P[artridge]’s conduct is that of the village Don Juan. Again, he behaves like a bull in a garden” (*Diary: Vol. 2* 186).

<sup>77</sup> Strachey was disappointed that the marriage had failed and it seems he became slightly disillusioned. Woolf records in her diary: “We were talking about love. [Lytton] said he had suffered tortures from D[uncan Grant] & H[enry] L[amb]. [He] had wished to marry them & settle down, had been refused; & now can love no more. ‘It is madness –’ he said. ‘One cannot treat lovers like rational people[.]’ [T]his was said of Ralph’s vagaries” (*Diary: Vol. 2* 126).

were fond of self-invention and were accustomed to the notion of veiling themselves, their identities, and therefore by extension their positioning with respect to others.

It is unclear why Strachey was known as Lytton, but it comes across in his earliest letters both to and from his parents and it was probably they who decided to call him by his second name as opposed to his first birth name of Giles. As early as 1894 he wrote to his father, signing the letter “Ever your loving son, Lytton” (Strachey, *Letters* 1). Carrington, however, made her own decision and “was always called Carrington *tout court*” (Lehman 88). She chose this deliberately non-gendered name over her first name of Dora, which she saw as emblematic of “Victorian sentimentality” (Gerzina 15). She was always known simply as Carrington.<sup>78</sup> In a portentous moment just after agreeing to wed Partridge, she wrote to both Strachey and Brennan that she would remain “Carrington” – an assertion of her own independence, but also of her reluctance to acknowledge her marriage. Two days before her wedding, she had to apply for a passport and wrote to Strachey of the comic situation which took place:

I had an awful time over my passport signing ‘D. Partridge’ on every line, and making a thousand mistakes. I got Noel Olivier to sign for me as she is a doctor. She thought Mrs P. was an excellent

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<sup>78</sup> It should be noted that Carrington referred to herself using a number of names, including Mopsa (to Strachey), as well as Doric, and Cirod (particularly to Brennan).

One of the only times she uses her first name is in a letter to her brother, Noel Carrington, in which she writes formally in a very ironic manner asking for money:

Dearest Noel, I am up a gum tree as the debts close in about me. And next week on the 14 we have to move from here and I have no wherewithal. Dear Brother hearken unto my prayer. Lest I be utterly consumed. I swear Faithfully I am making earnest attempts now to earn the bright sovereigns and give up my profligate life. Oh Saint Lewis hearken upon my supplications. The nett amount of Bills is £8.10. But I swear the golden day will come when all will be returned to you. Miserably your sister Dora. (Carrington, *Letters* 70)

joke and fairly roared over it! I didn't tell her it was nearly or  
would soon be a grim truth. (Carrington, *Letters* 179)

We see here that Carrington was in no way looking forward to her marriage and characterises it, and what she thought would be her loss of identity, as a "grim truth". This reluctance to cede her name and identity was not an isolated occurrence. Tellingly, she even misspelled her name on her diary as "Partride". Reginald Partridge, too, was veiled in a pseudonym. Known previously as Rex, he took to his renaming as Ralph by Strachey with little protestation. Revealingly, it tells of his submissive willingness to conform to a milieu in which identities were fashioned and composed to complement and appease desire. It also shows Partridge's pliant nature in gaining Strachey's approval. He realised that he would have to kowtow to Strachey and this itself is a reflection of his love for Carrington.

When taking the above into consideration, it becomes evident that Carrington and Strachey, and eventually Partridge, were involved in a complex ménage which did not subscribe to contemporary societal norms. One way of overcoming this was to invoke traditional ideas of kinship – Carrington and Strachey used inscriptions of descent, particularly in the beginning of their relationship, when it appears they were especially insecure. However, when they gained confidence in their, albeit unconventional, relationship they resorted to models of alliance. They had made a conscious choice to live together in an environment which suited both their individual needs. It also allowed them to care for each other and satisfy (most of) the other's needs; in short they chose to align themselves with each other and become allies. This changed with the introduction of

Partridge. Carrington and Strachey shifted from notions of alliance back to a model of kinship based on principles of descent, which created a gap between them as there was an inequality, with Strachey playing the paternal role. This created an opportunity for Partridge to penetrate an established domestic space and to be “adopted” as Strachey’s child.

With the dissolution of the marriage between Carrington and Partridge there was no longer recourse to familial (re)constructions. However, the marriage served as a conventional expression of love and legitimised the relationship between Carrington and Partridge. It also occluded the unconventional relationship between Carrington and Strachey – there was no need to veil the love within the complex triangle, both from themselves and from others. While Strachey still often played the paternal role to that of Carrington and Partridge as children, there was no need for verbal self-assurance to validate their love. Carrington continued to reside at Tidmarsh, and later Ham Spray with Strachey. He would often spend large amounts of time in London, but always retreated to the country homes which Carrington presided over. Partridge, too, lived in London with his mistress, Frances Marshall, but spent most weekends with Carrington and Strachey. Essentially, they settled into a domestic arrangement which suited all three of them and which kept their lives intertwined

## Conclusion

After the dissolution of the marriage between Carrington and Partridge, there is evident strain between the three characters. In 1924 Strachey, Partridge and Carrington moved to Ham Spray House in Wiltshire and, for a time, the house which Strachey had purchased united the threesome.<sup>79</sup> However, Carrington was still pursuing her liaison with Brenan and Partridge was in love with Frances Marshall, “a beautiful Princess that lives in Birrell & Garnett’s bookshop” (Carrington qtd. in Gerzina 202).

Partridge started to spend more and more time in London and in 1926 began to live with his mistress, Frances Marshall (Gerzina 233). Carrington, however, feeling insecure about the effect the separation would have on her relationship with Strachey, pleaded with both Partridge and Marshall that Partridge should still remain a part of her and Strachey’s domestic arrangement. Marshall assented to Carrington’s request and Partridge would spend the week living with Marshall in London and on weekends he (sometimes accompanied by Marshall) would join Carrington and Strachey at Ham Spray.

Carrington accepted Marshall and wrote to Brenan of her as “a delightful companion. Perhaps almost too perfect, beautiful, & unselfish. I think I would like her better if I could detect one fault!” (qtd. in Gerzina 205). It is clear that the two women had a fairly amicable relationship, but there were tensions between the two, and even though

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<sup>79</sup> Strachey left Partridge the house in his will, under the assumption that “Ralph and Carrington [would be] still legally married [and] it would of course belong to both of them” (Gerzina 231).

Carrington was no longer in love with Partridge, she was, to a certain degree, possessive over him. She wrote to Strachey:

I have telephoned R[alph] & told him that he can come next weekend (with F[rances]) as Roger is coming the 22<sup>nd</sup>. But as he has made arrangements I doubt if he'll alter them – I hoped he'd see that it might have been rather pleasant to come alone, as F was going with Lettice (?) & him to Noel's cottage. But he didn't suggest it... (1 October 1930)

We see that Carrington at times wanted Partridge to come alone to Ham Spray, perhaps as a means to consolidate what was once a fairly cohesive “family”.

During the last few years of her life Carrington was incredibly lonely and rather hermit-like; she seldom left Ham Spray and began to write in her diary quite often of how she “felt rather like a cat wandering about the house unable to rest. How quickly love becomes savage & grows bones, & gobbles” (10 February 1928). She felt this loneliness despite her affair with Beakus Penrose, a sailor.<sup>80</sup> Gerzina discusses the affair as being different from others, for Carrington was the one who pursued Penrose; he was “[q]uiet and unintellectual” and “posed no threat to her continuing life with Lytton” (262). This

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<sup>80</sup> In Chapter 2 I discuss how both Strachey and Carrington were attracted to sailors. They appealed to Carrington, partly because of Strachey's desire, but also because her brother, Teddy, was in “a mine-sweeping unit on the east coast (which is why Carrington referred to him as a sailor)” (Gerzina 80). She specifically likened Penrose to Teddy when she wrote to Rosamond Lehman:

I suppose you wonder sometimes why I am so fond of him. Its really very little to do with him actually, but because he is so like my brother who was killed. I couldn't say this to anyone [...] as I am awfully self conscious of being a romantic, and rather stupid. My brother was very silent and removed. I hardly ever was allowed to be intimate with him and I always put it off, thinking one day I'd be able to show him how much I cared and then it was too late. And partly because he wasn't reported killed, it took me ages to ever believe consciously he was dead. (qtd. in Gerzina 287)

relationship was rather volatile, though, and Penrose became increasingly controlling. Carrington fell pregnant in 1929 and decided to abort the baby. As much as Carrington was antipathetic towards children, Gerzina seems to suggest that one of the main reasons she aborted the foetus was because Strachey held “les petits peuples” in disdain (qtd. in Gerzina 271). A child would “completely upset the very delicate balance of life at Ham Spray” and “Lytton would undoubtedly wish to spend even less time” there (Gerzina 271).

Towards the end of 1931 Strachey became ill with misdiagnosed stomach cancer. Carrington was beside herself and held vigil at his bed. When it seemed that the disease was terminal she attempted suicide, but Partridge found her before she succeeded. On 22 January 1932 Strachey passed away and Carrington struggled to continue with her life. While Strachey had still been alive Partridge and others took measures to prevent her from taking her own life: “Dorelia [John] is summoned to be with Carrington, who will commit suicide they think” (Woolf, *Diary: Vol. 4* 61). Now that Strachey was dead though, Carrington’s suicide seemed inevitable to some and, ironically, it was Woolf who seems to have understood Carrington’s anguish best. Woolf wrote in her diary: “They cant leave Carrington alone. She says she will kill herself – quite reasonable – but better to wait until the first shock is over & see. Suicide seems to me quite sensible” (*Diary: Vol. 4* 66).

It is clear that Carrington considered it seriously for some time before she executed her plan. In the following diary extract, she expresses her loss in a manner which accurately

summarises the intimacy which pervaded their relationship and it reveals the utter joy and comfort they found in one another:

Really I have decided. And if I bring myself to think of reality for a few hours how could I bear the emptiness and loneliness of life without Lytton. For our separations were for me enforced. I was never in all these 16 years happy [when] I was without him. It was only I knew he disliked me to be dependent that I forced myself to make other attachments. Everything was enjoyed to be with him. He was & this is why he was everything to me, the only person to whom I never needed to lie. Because he never expected me to be anything different to what I was, and he never was curious if I did not tell him things. And he could do no wrong. No one will ever know the utter happiness of our life together. The absurd & fantastic jokes at meals & on our walks or over our friends, & his marvellous descriptions of the parties in London & his love affairs & then all his thoughts he shared with me. And I knew he loved me, & would always comfort me when I was sad, & be pleased with my success. When he was very ill, it was on the Tuesday, he suddenly said 'Carrington, why isn't she here. I want her, Darling Carrington, I love her. I always wanted to marry Carrington & I never did.' He could never have said anything more consoling. Not that I would have even if had asked me. But it was happiness to know he secretly had loved me so much, & told me before he died.



There is nothing I regret except perhaps that I didn't go away with him this summer. I couldn't ever have loved him more.

(Carrington, *Letters* 491)

Carrington borrowed a shotgun from one of her neighbours, ostensibly to kill rabbits, and attempted to shoot herself in the stomach – the location of Strachey's fatal disease. Unfortunately she failed and shot herself in the thigh and bled to death over a period of three hours on 11 March 1932. Because of Carrington's suicide so soon after Strachey's death, she is often seen as a rather tragic figure as her death is seen as the ultimate sacrifice for Strachey. Woolf goes so far as to say that Strachey is responsible for the death of Carrington in her diary entries when she writes "Lytton's affected by this act. I sometimes dislike him for it. He absorbed her[,] made her kill herself" (*Diary: Vol. 4* 83).

Because of her suicide, Carrington is perhaps the person most responsible for leaving a legacy of someone who sacrificed her life for unrequited love, but this thesis has shown that her love, in fact, was not unrequited. While their relationship is often seen as unconventional, the three models I have used show that their love took on rather conventional forms which changed as their relationship shifted. These models, to a large extent, mirror the different phases of their relationship. During their courtship it is clear that they were both attracted to each other, but because of Strachey's association with the Apostles, his love for Carrington would not be acceptable. However, it is useful to read their relationship using a model of a pederastic nature. Strachey occupied the role of Carrington's elder mentor or *erastes*, while she, as a woman of a lower class and less

educated than he, could be viewed as the *eromenos*. Such a configuration of their relationship did not infringe on the Brotherly Love that existed between him and his Apostolic friends. The relationship greatly benefited Carrington as Strachey served not only as her intellectual and sexual teacher, but the relationship also allowed her the freedom to experiment with her feminine identity, which she deplored.

The second model examines their life together at Tidmarsh and shows that they were steeped in a stable domestic environment where they could remove themselves from the Bloomsbury Group in London. When one examines the letters, one sees that they were in fact very much in love, and they worked towards creating a space of domestic bliss. However, in doing this, they tend to rely on the constraints of a heteronormative relationship and parody this as a means of subverting the heteronormative ideologies which permeated their parents' Victorian generation. The parody incorporates a critique of masculine and feminine identities and foregrounds how fluid gender identities are. When we examine the actions of Carrington and Strachey, we see that in many ways they conflate masculinity and femininity in a manner which shows two individuals complementing each other in a sometimes very practical manner. What is most important about this parody, though, is that while it is used to interrogate gender constructs and heteronormativity, these reasons are secondary to what was ultimately one of the only ways they could express their love for one another.

The third model looks at the ways Carrington and Strachey referred to each other throughout the duration of their relationship. I use concepts of kinship and begin, once

again, with their courtship during which they used notions of descent to refer to each other. However, once their relationship was consummated, they began to use terms associated with alliance which brought them closer to one another. Partridge disrupted their home at Tidmarsh and could be seen as the factor which caused the dissolution of the Tidmarsh “family”. Initially he was incorporated because both Carrington and Strachey were physically attracted to him, but Partridge was insistent on marrying Carrington. Reading the letters written during their relationship, as well as Woolf’s role in the proceedings, we see that Carrington did not marry Partridge because she loved him, but instead because she felt that her relationship with Strachey would be threatened if Partridge left her. During her liaison with Partridge the two of them were often described (by themselves and others) as Strachey’s children, no doubt because he adopted a patriarchal role, dispensing advice on the pending nuptials and also taking on financial burdens in looking after them. With the dissolution of the Carrington-Partridge marriage though, as a result of their infidelities, the Tidmarsh “family” was disbanded.

It is crucial when examining these three models to take cognisance of the fact that these paradigms served as a means to veil a love which society did not socially sanction. Their relationship was socially unacceptable, even within the social confines of Bloomsbury, and many of their contemporaries chose to describe Carrington as Strachey’s “housekeeper”, “secretary” or “cook”. Often she is perceived as being desperately in love and so devoted to him at the expense of her own independence and her talent as an artist. Yet when we examine the three models it becomes apparent that Carrington takes on the role of the *eromenos*, the wife, and the niece or child, all of which represent discourses

which “are productive of the identities which they appear to be merely representing” (Alsop *et al.*, 98). These terms which existed between Carrington and Strachey enable them to self-fashion and construct identities which were complementary. Concepts of pederasty, parody and kinship allow the reader to view the relationship between these two individuals as a “love affair” in which there was a mutual attraction and respect for one another, but because of its unconventional nature, it needed to locate itself within liminal and transgressive spaces. The models offer perspectives which reveal Carrington and Strachey finding inimitable ways of expressing their love for one another.

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