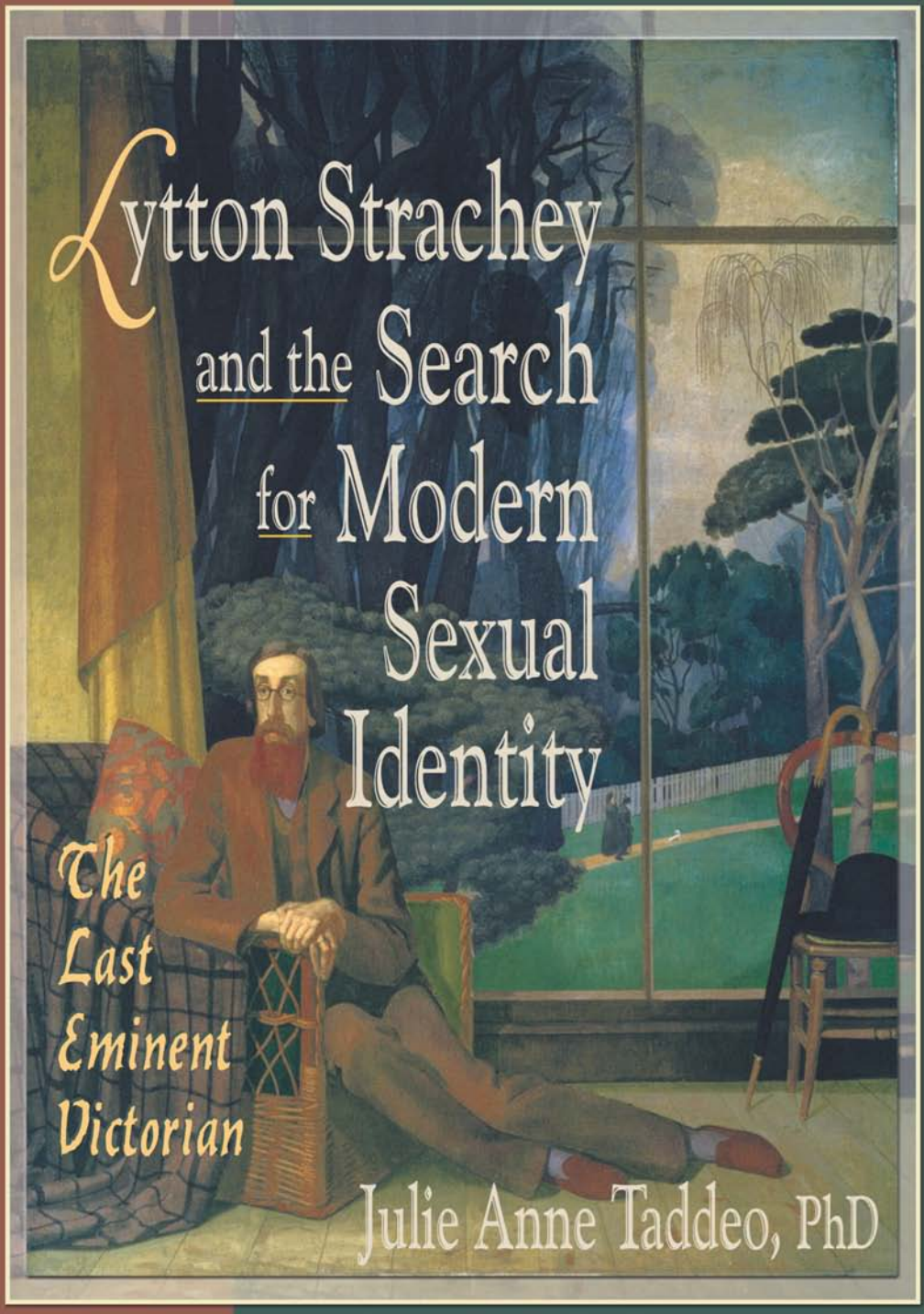
Lytton Strachey
and the Search
for Modern
Sexual
Identity
The
Last
Eminent
Victorian
Julie Anne Taddeo, PhD

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The Last Eminent Victorian

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julie Anne Taddeo, PhD, has been teaching modern British and European history and women's studies at Temple University in Philadelphia since 1996. She has also taught at the University of Rochester and St. John Fisher College. Dr. Taddeo has published articles on Strachey, Bloomsbury, and sexuality in the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* and in the anthology *Un-Manning Modernism: Gendered Re-Readings,* and has also published an article on the mysteries of Anne Perry in *Clues.* She has presented at numerous conferences and has contributed to forthcoming anthologies on British history and women's studies. She is a member of the American Historical Association, the American Association of University Women, the New York State Association of European Historians, and the Upstate New York Women's History Organization.

Preface and Acknowledgments

This work, as with the first publications of most academics, began as the subject of my doctoral dissertation. I discovered Lytton Strachey in a graduate seminar when a colleague suggested that, since I was interested in gender, I might want to study Virginia Woolf. As the once forgotten but now overly documented female modernist, Virginia Woolf did introduce me to Strachey through a series of letters between the two Bloomsbury modernists. Immediately I discovered that it was Strachey who posed the greater challenge to feminist scholars. From a family of suffragists, a homosexual and neurasthenic, and a writer in the tradition of Oscar Wilde, Strachey seemed the perfect champion of a brand of modernism that was essentially feminist and sexually liberating. Upon a closer reading of his thousands of letters and his journals, I discovered a very different man. Caught in the transition from the old world of the Victorians to the new world of post–World War I England, Strachey believed he was hastening the demise of his "repellent ancestors." Yet, so much of his writings, both private and those intended for publication, reinforced Victorian stereotypes and definitions of class and gender. His story is simply that—his story; I make no claim that Strachey is representative of all male homosexual intellectuals, but his story can tell those of us interested in issues of masculinity, homosexuality, modernism, and cultural history about the struggles even the so-called rebels endured as they tried to create new types of art and identity. This study is not an attempt to write his biography, a project previously done in great detail and beauty by Michael Holroyd, but it does examine Strachey's life as a way to understand some of the issues concerning his generation of Cambridge and Bloomsbury colleagues, and how they battled the Victorian ideology, often without success.

Each of the chapters can almost be read as a separate essay. I examine Strachey's role at Cambridge before World War I and how he created his version of homosexuality out of the Victorian tradition of male romantic friendship. His version, though on the surface liberating and playful, eventually led to conflict and great unhappiness for

Strachey as he pursued a constraining notion of Ideal Love. The next chapters look at Strachey's relations with the British Empire, as he constructed a rich fantasy life that rested on racial and class differences, and then his friendships and professional rivalries with the women of Bloomsbury. These relationships call into question his own feminism as well as raise concerns about his marginal status as a homosexual in the post-Wildean era. Last, I try to link Strachey's life and work to the larger movement of English modernism, and how his use of sexuality, androgyny, and history defined, yet also undermined, his brand of modernism.

This project has been assisted at various stages by the kindness and generosity of several individuals. While a student at the University of Rochester, most of my primary research was funded by grants from the university and the Susan B. Anthony Institute for Women's Studies. The Bernadotte E. Schmitt Grant of the American Historical Association provided additional funding for travel and research. In England, I was helped by Sally Brown and a wonderful, efficient staff at the British Library; Jackie Cox, the curator of the Keynes's Papers at King's College, Cambridge University; and Elizabeth Inglis, curator of the Monks House Leonard Woolf Papers at University of Sussex, as well as librarians Deborah Shorley and Dorothy Sheridan. I want to acknowledge the Society of Authors as agents of the Strachey Trust for permission to cite from these papers, as well as those held by The Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library and the Raymond H. Taylor Collection at Princeton University. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Jeremy Crow of the Society of Authors for his assistance in locating and obtaining copyright permissions. Michael Holroyd graciously met with me and encouraged yet another study of Lytton Strachey, while Barbara Caine, whose own research on the Strachey family promises to shed further light on this very Victorian, yet also so modern, family, provided useful information on certain Strachey letters.

My advisers at Rochester, Bonnie G. Smith, Stewart Weaver, and William McGrath, provided useful commentary and criticisms, and Seth Koven at Villanova University constantly pushed me to ask new and "sexier" questions about Strachey's sexuality. Colleagues William Peniston, George Robb, and Alexandra Lord encouraged me to publish this work and engaged me in numerous discussions of male sexuality.

On a personal note, I want to acknowledge the support of my parents, Joseph and Josephine Taddeo; my sister, Laura Taddeo; cousin JoAnn D'Angelo; and good friend Karen Brankacz, who listened to drafts, attended conferences, taught me computer skills, looked up bibliographic resources, and offered encouragement and pastries. Also, my thanks to Paulo Bedaque, who for the past ten years has been my constant companion and friend, reader and critic, and, to quote Strachey, my "glimpse of heaven."

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Introduction

"I don't know whether I'm hopelessly classical or simply out-of-date."[1] On the eve of his death Lytton Strachey looked back on his literary career with regret and self-reproach. Though at the center of England's Bloomsbury Group, he envied and failed to compete with his more prolific colleagues E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, and none of his publications had aroused the public outcry or debate associated with those of his enemy D. H. Lawrence. By 1930, Strachey's claim to fame as the satirist of an array of such eminent Victorians as the queen and Florence Nightingale paled beside the popularity of the "so many modern writers whom so many other people like very much."[2] These unnamed writers who incited Strachey's wrath had dared to challenge his own self-appointed position as cultural innovator and rebel. Since his undergraduate days at Cambridge University, Strachey had boasted of his guiding role in England's "new age" and had tried to construct a literary and public identity that accentuated his break from his nineteenth-century ancestors. Yet, even as he denounced his heritage, Strachey maintained a peculiar allegiance to Victorianism, and his middle-age lament indicated a reluctant awareness that he had finished last in the "battle of the moderns."

The English brand of modernism to which Strachey aspired involved a prevailing sense of dislocation from the past and a commitment to the active remaking of art. The self-styled modernists believed the era of Victorianism had ended, and in its place they offered a new conception of society, art, and thought.[3] A disillusioned vision, an impending sense of crisis, a disregard for old forms, and an awakened sexual curiosity characterized Strachey's generation of artists, writers, philosophers, and activists.[4] Historians and literary critics traditionally have accepted Strachey's view of himself as a member of the intellectually and socially elite group of modernists. Paul Fussell, Noel Annan, and Paul Levy, for example, praise the writer's "feline prose" that "tore the skin off middle-class respectability," and they interpret Strachey's published biographies and flamboyant dress as deliberate parodies of the Victorian ideals of virility and manly action.[5] Strachey's biographer, Mi-

chael Holroyd, credits him with "smuggling deviant sexual behavior into our [British] national heritage with his subtle reassessments of Elizabethan and Victorian times." Strachey's influence especially extended over "modern behavior with his extraordinary free and tolerant lifestyle."[6]

Since the 1960s, Strachey and the Bloomsbury Group in general have incited interest among feminist and queer studies scholars, not so much for their publications and art, but for their lifestyles, which seemed to challenge Victorian convention. In her now classic 1973 study of androgyny, Carolyn Heilbrun pointed to the Bloomsbury Group as the forerunners of the sexual liberation movement of the 1960s.[7] Two decades later, queer theorists in the 1990s, having exhausted their analyses of Oscar Wilde and E. M. Forster, at last turned to Strachey, who in his capes, earrings, and heels, and with his lounging pose and comedic belittling of historical figures, seemed the very embodiment of camp. American critic Edmund Wilson described Strachey as "the high-voiced old Bloomsbury gossip gloating over the scandals of the past,"[8] and George Piggford and Christopher Reed continue to read Strachey's life and writing as part of a larger project of homosexual transgression against Victorianism.[9] Some feminist scholars since Heilbrun's study have taken a different approach to Strachey and his position in the Bloomsbury Group. Encouraged by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar to "rethink" and "engender" modernism, feminist 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.[10]

These varying interpretations of Bloomsbury's leader suggest that his self-fashioning as Britain's leading modernist was riddled with complications. In Strachey we see a man caught in the evolution to modernity, whose troubled sexual life was shaped by the larger historical transition away from Victorianism. Although some fans of Bloomsbury continue to stress the group's "complete freedom" from class and gender consciousness pervasive in British society in the early twentieth century,[11] a closer reading of Strachey's life and work will highlight his own struggle with Victorian mores and practices. Despite his challenge to his colleagues to "fuck, bugger, and abuse themselves to their hearts' content,"[12] he faced tremendous guilt and fear, as well as legal and social obstacles, whenever he tried to follow his own advice.

The vast bulk of Strachey's unpublished prose, poetry, and correspondence examined in the following chapters reveals a disparity between his desire to "be modern" and the actual extent of his sexual, literary, political, and social avant-gardism. Despite his determination to disassociate himself from his parents' generation, Strachey ultimately reinforced the ideas, institutions, and morals of his Victorian predecessors, whom he declared lived within a "glass case of physical and intellectual impotence."[13] At the same time that he questioned and ridiculed all things Victorian, his writings and sexual behavior depended on his battle with this ideological formulation.

Rooted in ideas of sexual, class, and racial differences, Victorianism promoted the superiority of the upper-middle-class, university-educated English man and stressed his alienation from women, the lower classes, and the "inferior" nonwhite races. The nineteenth century saw the establishment of increasingly rigid boundaries between private and public selves so that gender differences solidified into apparently natural and immutable traits. The striving competitive masculinity and a nurturant, domestic femininity became the guiding rubric within which various aspects of culture were subsumed.[14] Mary Poovey's study of mid-Victorian culture notes the "work" performed particularly by the ideology of sexual and gender differences in all areas of English life. She, similar to Michel Foucault, asserts the absence of individual choice and conscious control exerted by Victorians over their own thoughts and actions.[15] Strachey's rebellion against the Victorians was complicated by his dual position. He wrote from a position of authority, as a Cambridge-educated male from one of England's leading imperial families, but he also was a homosexual, existing on the moral and legal margins of "respectable" society. At the same time that he satirized "eminent Victorians," he longed for validation, which he received in the form of an invitation to court, as well as letters from his adoring public, and in his relations with "modern" women who nevertheless allowed him to play the role of patriarch. Victorian notions of difference often empowered Strachey, whether in his relations with those he regarded as his sexually, racially, or socially defined "others" or in his creation of a new literary form, the "psychobiography." As both a proponent and prisoner of Victorian ideology, therefore, Strachey did not represent a new "modern consciousness" but rather the final chapter of his own collection of miniportraits, *Eminent Victorians* (1918).

Between 1967 and 1969, Michael Holroyd published a two-volume biography of Lytton Strachey's life and work.[16] Holroyd described Strachey's attitude toward the Victorians as a combination of awe and repulsion, and his detailed and heavily psychoanalytical study presented Strachey's battle against an overbearing mother and his triumphs over personal and professional insecurities. Holroyd also was the first biographer to acknowledge and even document Strachey's homosexuality as well as the sexual relations of the entire Bloomsbury Group. My own analysis begins in part where Holroyd's finishes and addresses the impact of gender, class, and race on Strachey's public and private lives. Also, though Holroyd exposes Strachey's homosexuality, he fails, as Julian Symons notes, to address the division in Strachey's personality between the fascination held for him by male beauty and the desire for sexual satisfaction.[17] The ongoing battle between what Strachey called his "higher" and "lower" selves not only affected his personal relationships but his writings as well. In addition to his Cambridge and Bloomsbury compositions, Strachey's diaries and poetry offer a picture of the biographer that clearly undermines the image of sexual iconoclast he so carefully constructed for public consumption. My analysis relies most heavily on Strachey's unpublished correspondence with his family, colleagues, lovers, and fans. Letters, he believed, were "the only really satisfactory form of literature" that drew one into the world from which they had been written, and in Strachey's case, his epistles revealed a private self at odds with his public image.[18]

In presenting Strachey as the last eminent Victorian, I also reject the standard association of modernism with sexual innovation, transgression, and liberation. In her discussion of Bloomsbury, Carolyn Heilbrun, for example, identifies Strachey and his colleagues as the earliest major proponents of the "androgynous way of life." For the first time, Heilbrun argues, a group existed in which "masculinity and femininity were marvelously mixed in its members."[19] Quentin Bell, the most prolific (and biased) of the Bloomsbury chroniclers, doubts that any group had ever been "quite as radical in its approach to sexual taboos" as Strachey's.[20] The following chapters, however, question Strachey's alleged personal and artistic blurring of gender lines and explore, instead, his social and literary polarizations of men and women. Also, Strachey's troubled attempts to accept and act out his homosexuality contradict claims that the author confidently paraded his sexuality before a shocked and disapproving public. Strachey cast himself as an

avant-garde writer and personality and deliberately used his homosexuality to create a new political and social identity. However, undermining the self-constructed image of androgyne, rebel, and modernist par excellence was Strachey's lingering, though often unconscious, commitment to Victorian sexuality, masculinity, and morality. The image of the upper-middle-class white Englishman held a particular fascination for Strachey, representing to him security, power, and even a refuge from himself.

A central theme of this study concerns Strachey's "crisis of identity." To several of his friends Strachey expressed his regret that "one can't now and then change sexes."[21] However, in place of the standard interpretation of Strachey as the embodiment of androgyny and the alternative to Victorian virile masculinity, I see his life as an unconscious caricature of the bourgeois Victorian woman. Until he achieved literary success at age thirty-eight, Strachey failed to escape the restrictive sphere of his parental home. Suffering from repeated bouts of unidentifiable illnesses, Strachey used his "neurasthenia" as an excuse for his financial and professional failures as well as a refuge from homosexual desire. While his sisters, Dorothy, Philippa, and Marjorie Strachey, rightfully claimed the title of "New Women" as writers, suffragettes, and educators, Lytton sought male protectors and feared the onset of adulthood and responsibility. Long before his Bloomsbury colleague Virginia Woolf coined the now famous phrase, Strachey wrote of his longing for a "room of his own," and an income to achieve the independence expected of his sex.[22]

The eventual attainment of monetary and social success, however, did not remedy Strachey's physical and psychological debilities. His postwar fame and frequent public appearances only increased his sense of inadequacy. The British press not only reviewed his books but passed comment on his looks. References to the large nose, pale complexion, and "the daddy long legs, big lips" of the "inhuman old maid of a man" agonized Strachey, since he blamed his appearance for his inability to find and hold onto love.[23] Also, though he craved success, he now wondered, "Can a popular author be a good one? It's alarming to be welcomed with open arms by Gosse, Jack Squire and *The Times*."[24]

Scholars have virtually ignored Strachey's postwar writings, which did not achieve the critical success of his 1918 bestseller, *Eminent Victorians*. These later works (both published and unpublished) reveal to an even greater extent Strachey's conflicting commitment to both mod-

ernism and Victorianism. His writings were also therapeutic, allowing him to imagine guilt-free fantasies of sexual fulfillment and to wreak revenge upon strong-willed women who threatened the gender order. In treating what he called the "very interesting question" of sex, for example, Strachey now turned to the "modern psychology" of Freud.[25] Eager to please his younger brother James, a Freudian analyst and translator, yet unwilling to undergo psychoanalysis himself, Strachey applied Freud's theories to his literary studies of Queens Victoria and Elizabeth I. Strachey manipulated Freud's ideas about female sexuality to reinforce traditional concepts of gender while completely ignoring Freud's theories of male homosexuality. That Strachey still used the traditional form of biography in conjunction with the "new" psychology to attack female icons partially explains his growing rift with Virginia Woolf. Moreover, as a self-proclaimed "modern inquirer" and "explorer of the past," Strachey seemed to acknowledge the tension between the two worlds of Victorianism and modernism that his writings revealed.[26] Gerald Brenan believed Strachey's works placed him on the "borderline between the new and the old,"[27] a statement that also summarized how the writer lived his life, moving back and forth between his identities as bourgeois Victorian and anti-Victorian rebel.

The tension between Strachey's commitment to Victorian mores and his desire for sexual freedom influenced his concept of love between men formulated during his undergraduate career at Cambridge. In his second year at university, Strachey was elected to the secret Society of Apostles. The Brotherhood to which he now belonged constructed its own code of manliness that sanctioned all-male romantic friendships. The Apostles advocated the Neoplatonist doctrine of the Higher Sodomy, following in the tradition of such eminent Victorian champions of Greek Love as John Addington Symonds and Goldworthy Lowes Dickinson. Chapter 1 examines the philosophy of Brotherly Love and Strachey's attempts to realize its ideals in his relationships with the artists Duncan Grant and Henry Lamb, Cambridge undergraduates J. T. Sheppard and Arthur Hobhouse, and Oxford students Ralph Partridge and Roger Senhouse. These encounters promoted a commitment to a standard of masculine behavior that did not always defy the Victorian code of sexual conduct but actually upheld nineteenth-century notions of gender and class differences. Devotion to the Higher Sodomy served two major functions: it shielded the Brothers from affiliation with the newly identified, ille-

gal, 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.

Election to the Apostles was for Strachey *the* defining moment of his life and therefore an appropriate starting point for my analysis. What mattered most to the young Strachey was that at Cambridge he discovered other "Greek souls" and found a justification for what he sometimes feared was a "disease" marked by "unnatural desires."[28] Within the rooms of his Brothers, Strachey savored the "ethereal atmosphere of free and audacious inquiry." Unfortunately, the Apostles' discussion and sometimes practice of Brotherly Love was overshadowed by the fate of Oscar Wilde. After Wilde's trials in 1895, growing suspicion was directed at such secret societies within the male bastion of the university.

Since the 1985 publication of Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire,* the emergence of male homosexuality at the fin de siècle has become a prominent topic in Victorian studies.[29] Still, little scholarly interest has been directed to the Edwardian and post–World War I periods in which Strachey and other young men coped with the Wildean legacy of repression. Such scholars as Jonathan Dollimore, Ed Cohen, and Alan Sinfield use the case of Oscar Wilde as a historical example of rebellious sexuality and writing. Wilde's trial dominates theoretical discussions of homosexuality since it represents a turning point—after 1895 the homosexual becomes *the* "category of sexual transgression."[30] The subject of all-male Love before Wilde's demise is another area of recent scholarly interest. However, these studies tend to concentrate on the Greek revival at Oxford, thus ignoring the Cambridge Apostles' use of Hellenism (both before and after the Wilde trials) as a discursive space in which desire between men was validated.[31] The Apostles' use of the platonic ideal of "spiritual procreancy" can be read, in a similar fashion, as a form of homosexual counterdiscourse.[32] Although Strachey engaged in a series of unsuccessful and unfulfilled love affairs at Cambridge, he did find intellectual freedom within the Society, where sex and male Love served as the weekly topics of discussion. However, this counterdiscourse also forced men such as Strachey to keep homosexuality private, to censor their published writings as well as their private letters and diaries, and to experi-

ence a crisis of confidence alleviated only by their sense of gender and class exclusivity. Furthermore, Ed Cohen reminds us that textual depictions of male Love both reproduce and resist the dominant heterosexual ideologies and practices.[33] As an Apostle, and later as a member of Bloomsbury, Strachey legitimized, not only a theory of all-male Love, but a theory of male supremacy and female inferiority that counterbalanced his role as sexual outcast.

Despite such efforts to validate all-male Love, the Wilde trials left their imprint on Strachey's generation of homosexual intellectuals. Any distinctions within the public imagination between the aesthete, the introspective weakling of the ivory tower, and the homosexual had disappeared. Any signs of "enfeebled masculinity" (which the sickly Strachey exhibited) contradicted the ideal of English manhood: dutiful, physically and morally robust, and self-sacrificing.[34] Hounded by the need for secrecy, the Edwardian Apostles, therefore, tried to distance themselves from the image of the "queer" that had emerged during Wilde's prosecution.[35] Unlike the leisured effeminate aesthete who paid for sex with lower-class boys, the Apostle invoked the "Greek view of life." Hellenism provided a justification of sexual and emotional ties between men of the same social background and offered a defense against feminizing representations of men who desired other men.[36]

Despite such a defense, Strachey was often reluctant to cross the line from spiritual to physical love. His pursuit of a spiritual, higher Love conflicted with his rich fantasy life of "lower" sexual adventure in London's East End, the Arabian desert, or the English countryside. Chapter 2 builds on the current theme in literary and gender studies of "sexual exiles" who crossed boundaries of race and class not only to find physical gratification but to escape the constraints of normative bourgeois masculinity. Similar to André Gide, Oscar Wilde, and E. M. Forster, Strachey 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. Unlike Gide and Wilde, most of Strachey's encounters with these others were imaginary; he used his journal and private fiction to indulge his fantasies, to create a safe place for his desire. Troubled by fears of penetration and linking sex with disease and death, Strachey fashioned his own literary empire in which he reigned supreme. Though he secretly desired what he consid-

ered the "unique" mind and body of the ploughboy, boxer, and gondolier, Strachey asserted his superior control and preserved himself from the "taint" of such youths. Assuming difference as the basis of desire, Strachey perpetuated in action and fancy the very system of domestic, foreign, and sexual imperialism that he condemned in print. While these private writings clashed with Strachey's public persona as the opponent of empire, his imperialist fantasies inevitably grew out of his and his Cambridge Brothers' dual construction of the higher and lower forms of all-male Love.

Cambridge would always remain to Strachey "a complete myth . . . with all the mystery and importance of a myth," but this idealized view of the university and his relationships within its protective walls would make his encounters with other men and women quite problematic. Strachey's ascendancy within the Society and his credo of "frankness" eventually paved the way for his intellectual and sexual leadership of the Bloomsbury Group by 1908.[37] The socially privileged intellectuals of Strachey's Cambridge circle preferred the pursuit of the "greatest good" of male friendship to the company of women. Women belonged to the "phenomenal" and insignificant world outside of Cambridge and remained, even in the opinion of these moderns, an inferior sex. 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 to 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. Chapters 3 and 4, therefore, address Strachey's often ambiguous relationships with the women within his family and literary and social circles. These relationships strongly influenced his writings for publication. Though he boasted that he reinvented the art of biography, he did little to undermine the representations of men and women fashioned by his Victorian predecessors. Similar to Heilbrun, Barbara Fassler praises Bloomsbury's introduction of androgyny into English literature and human relations, but both scholars overlook Strachey's personal and literary obsession with gender difference.[38] In fact, his portraits of female reformers and monarchs attacked rather than applauded the assumption of power by women. He created portraits of