

Finding and Keeping Olivia

Ruth McCann

For most of my life, I was profoundly skeptical about the enterprise of amassing rare books. What was the use, I thought, of hoarding fragile, papery materials that could easily be ruined with one casual slosh of a coffee cup? This prejudice against delicate things sprang quite naturally, I suppose, from my parents' insistence that any Old Items they acquire be sturdy, if not useful. In a typical gesture towards the permanent, my father had his favorite purchase, a stone sculpture of the Hindu elephant-god Ganesha, bricked into our garden wall, where its stoic endurance of Connecticut winters gives silent testament to its durability.

I held on to this familial scorn for the ephemeral until my fondness for books—and for one book in particular—pushed me into the vast and addictive world of 'rare books,' a world in which I am still a fresh, though eager, initiate. I've always been fond of my books, particularly my almost-complete works of Roald Dahl. But only recently have I cared about dust-jackets and foxing, about carefully ferrying around my tiny collection, double-wrapped in plastic bags and zipped into an unsightly waterproof knapsack. This 'collection' (admittedly limited by my undergraduate budget) comprises eight editions of the same novel – *Olivia* by Dorothy Strachey (1865-1960).

Whatever fame Strachey has derives largely from her association with other, more luminous stars—she was the sister of Lytton Strachey, wife of painter Simon Bussy, part of the Bloomsbury group, and the primary translator of French writer André Gide, with whom she carried on a semi-romantic friendship and a voluble correspondence. In 1933, Strachey dashed off *Olivia* in French and sent the manuscript to Gide, who dismissed the book as being too fanciful. After fifteen years, Strachey revisited *Olivia*, translated it into English, and—with encouragement from friends, novelist Rosamond Lehmann among them—submitted it to Leonard Woolf. At Strachey's gentle urging, Gide re-read the novel and completely revised his earlier opinion: "You musn't hide this little masterpiece under a bushel," he wrote. With Gide's blessing and Woolf's enthusiastic endorsement, the book was published by the Hogarth Press in 1949 as *Olivia by Olivia*.

Despite excellent critical reception, Strachey was eager to mask her authorial identity. "P.S. my book is to be anonymous," she wrote to Gide, "and *please don't mention it to any one* – though I have told Roger." But within months of publication, several journalists had outed Strachey, though some speculated that 'Olivia' was either Roger Martin du Gard, who had re-translated the novel into French, or Gide himself. (The dust-jacket on the first Dutch edition affirms that Gide *didn't* write *Olivia* and that "The author wished to remain incognito, and it does not matter who it is.") Strachey's insistence on anonymity undoubtedly stemmed from concerns about the book's lesbian content. Like much contemporaneous gay writing, *Olivia* avoids explicit vocabulary (words like 'lesbian,' 'queer,' or 'homosexual' never appear), but its Sapphic nature is unmistakable—so unmistakable that *Olivia* appeared in the Catholic index of banned books. And it was precisely because of this Sapphism that my attention was directed to the novel. I first read *Olivia* while researching for my thesis in the English Department (the thesis is on gay coming-of-age literature in early-to-mid 20th-

century Britain—admittedly a niche). And I was astonished to find that, unlike so much of what I was reading, *Olivia* was artfully subtle, emotionally accurate, and beautifully written.

A semi-autobiographical work, *Olivia* was based on Strachey's education at Les Ruches, an all-girls boarding school in Fontainebleau run by Marie Souvestre. Narrated by the grown-up Olivia, the novel describes the 16-year-old Olivia's intense love for an enigmatic teacher, Mademoiselle Julie. After the mysterious death of her lover, Mlle Cara, Julie attempts suicide. The novel is refreshingly devoid of any lesbian self-hatred on Olivia's part; she regards her love for Julie as something 'amazing' and 'innocent.' But we also learn that adult-Olivia's urge to describe her experiences has long been thwarted by 'a deep-rooted instinct, which all my life has kept me from any form of unveiling, which has forbidden me many of the purest physical pleasures and all literary expression.'

I began searching for editions of *Olivia* (Strachey's only novel) in hopes of discovering how and when Strachey became directly associated with the book. Though the 1975 Spanish edition, the 1981 Hogarth, and the Triangle edition all credit Strachey on the lower cover or inside the dust-jacket, 'Olivia' is the name emblazoned on the upper cover, suggesting that readers were more likely to recognize *Olivia by Olivia*, without Strachey's name attached. In a nod to this dilemma, the Cleis edition credits 'Dorothy Strachey (Writing as Olivia).' But even Strachey's name is something of a complication—Triangle calls her 'Strachey Bussy,' and she's billed as 'Bussy' in her published correspondence with Gide.

The issue of cover art is fascinating, too; the first-edition dust-jacket sports a Parisian sketch by Duncan Grant on both covers, as though intentionally leaving no space for informative blurbs. Last year's Vintage cover alludes to the novel's homosexual themes with its quaint graphic of two adjoining pairs of ladies' boots. But the eerie Editorial Lumen cover is my favorite: In a tinted photograph, two schoolgirls in white hats bend their heads together while a crouching girl stares morosely into the lens—as though to emphasize the child's difference, she remains in un-tinted black and white.

Though I hope someday to collect Colette, Isherwood, Djuna Barnes, and other favorites, *Olivia* is my current preoccupation—I'm now hunting for a copy of du Gard's translation with Lehmann's introduction, a 1960s edition with a wonderful pulp-y cover, and a copy of the Virago edition, which I believe was the first to credit Strachey. This collecting feeds my curiosity about anonymity, about the judgments offered by forewords, about publishers' attention to Sapphic themes, about clues provided by cover-art. But my interest in Strachey is also, admittedly, a sentimental one.

Having grappled with my own, far more minor issues of anonymity, I find myself feeling wistful about the personal and literary closeting that Strachey underwent—if circumstances had been different, might she have written more prolifically or more candidly? I feel wistful, too, about the novel's undeserved consignment to the obscure periphery of 'the canon.' Despite my resolution not to care about papery things, I can't help but feel a tugging sense of obligation towards these books—an obligation to find them and keep them and write about what I've found and kept, to preserve and give witness to the complex history of a novel that, to me, has meant a great deal.

**Note: For much of what I know about Dorothy Strachey, I am indebted to Regina Marler's foreword to the Cleis edition, and Richard Tedeschi's Selected Letters of André Gide and Dorothy Bussy. I am grateful, too, to Peter Howard of Serendipity Books in Berkeley for his helpful guidance, and to the much-admired Terry Castle, who recommended Olivia in the first place.*

Ruth McCann

Bibliography

Olivia by Olivia. London: The Hogarth Press, 1949.

This edition is bound in purple cloth, with the title and Hogarth device stamped and gilded on the spine. A small hair-ribbon design is stamped and gilded on the top-left corner of the upper cover. 'Dorothy Bussy' has been written in pencil on the title-page. A book-plate appears to have been removed from the free endpaper. The dust-jacket (designed by Duncan Grant) has been taped slightly and has suffered some foxing, mostly on the spine.

Olivia by Olivia. Bristol: Readers Union Ltd., and The Hogarth Press, 1950.

This edition, missing its dust-jacket, is bound in black, lacquered cloth. The title and Readers Union device are stamped and gilded on the spine, though both stamps are slightly faded. On the top-left of the upper cover is the same hair-ribbon design found on the first-edition, though this stamp is colored pink. The upper free endpaper bears a white-out mark where someone appears to have blotted out a former-owner's name. On the free endpaper, someone written 'Dorothy Strachey' in pencil.

Olivia door Olivia. Trans. A.H. Nijhoff. 's-Graveland: Uitgeverij De Driehoek, 1950.

This is a copy of the first Dutch translation of *Olivia*. Its binding (white cloth) is worn and slightly stained. The title and printer's device are stamped and gilded on the spine; the upper cover is stamped with what appears to be a gilt letter D, presumably after the printer (De Driehoek). A book plate on the paste-down endpaper indicates that 'A.A.P. Couvee' was the book's last owner. A portion of the dust-jacket, kindly translated by a Dutch-speaking friend, goes as follows: "When this booklet came out in early 1949, there was a lot of guessing throughout the literary world regarding the personality hidden behind the pseudonym "Olivia." There was even talk of it being Andre Gide. The author wished to remain incognito, and it does not matter who it is, but is quite striking that this short autobiography was even briefly considered to be a work by Gide. This book is indeed of very high quality, both literary and psychological. It is well balanced composition-wise, and manages to interest the reader from the very beginning till the end."

Olivia por Olivia. Barcelona: Editorial Lumen, 1975.

This adhesive-bound paperback edition (the first Spanish-language translation?) seems to credit no translator. The book is the 28th in a paperback series called ‘Palabra Menor’ (literally ‘minor word’ or ‘younger word’) that also includes works by Wilde, Alejo Carpentier, Whitman, Woolf, and Truman Capote. The upper-cover design features a small floral graphic in the lower-right corner and a tinted, doctored photo of a group of schoolgirls.

Olivia by Olivia. London: The Hogarth Press, 1981.

This ‘reissued’ *Olivia* looks almost exactly like the first edition—the type was set identically, and the cloth binding and gilt stamps mirror those on the 1949 Hogarth edition, though the cloth is rougher and of a less vibrant shade. The exterior of the dust-jacket (slightly foxed on the interior) mirrors the 1949 jacket, including the Duncan Grant cover-art. The interior of the dust jacket contains blurbs from Desmond MacCarthy, the TLS, and J.W. Lambert, and it credits Dorothy Strachey, though the title page credits simply ‘Olivia.’

Olivia by Olivia. New York: Triangle Quality Paperback Book Club, 1995.

This adhesive-bound paperback is part of the ‘Triangle Classics’ series, which purports to be ‘Illuminating the Gay and Lesbian Experience.’ Strachey (credited as ‘Dorothy Strachey Bussy’) is mentioned on the lower cover and on the penultimate page. The cover-design (by Monica Elias) features a striking black-and-white photograph by Gertude Kasebier, a remarkable turn-of-the-century American photographer.

Strachey, Dorothy. Olivia: A Novel. San Francisco: Cleis, 2006.

This Cleis edition (adhesive-bound paperback) includes a foreword by Regina Marler (ed. Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell). The upper cover and spine list the author as: ‘Dorothy Strachey (Writing as ‘Olivia’).

Strachey, Dorothy. Olivia. London: Vintage, 2008.

This adhesive-bound Vintage Classics paperback lists the author as ‘Dorothy Strachey’ on the spine and simply ‘Strachey’ on the upper cover. A small biography of Strachey is included on the second page of the book. The lower cover features a blurb from British lesbian novelist Sarah Waters, author of Tipping the Velvet. The lower cover also recommends Orlando to readers of Olivia.