

## CENSORS, CRITICS, AND THE SUPPRESSION OF NORAH JAMES'S SLEEVELESS ERRAND

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In his seminal essay, "Censorship and the Imposition of Form," Pierre Bourdieu suggests that censorship, while often conceived as the literalized or "explicit" exercise of state power against transgressions of expression and thought, can also be understood as "the structure of the field itself which governs expression by governing both access to expression and the form of expression," a secondary or parallel governance that operates beyond the legalistic repression more commonly (and reductively) conceived (138).<sup>1</sup> Two explicit examples of British state censorship dominate the literary history of the late 1920s: the successful prosecution of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* and the suppression of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Linked together in censorship histories, these two remarkable novels have been juxtaposed by literary critics such as Joan Scanlon and Adam Parkes. However, within a generation, the "norms of the field" of expression (Bourdieu, "Censorship" 159) permitted both works direct access to print: *The Well* reappeared in a 1949 British edition, and *Chatterley's* 1960 Penguin was a best seller. A third novel was also explicitly censored in the late twenties, one that may well be "the most suppressed novel ever published in England" ("JAMES" 716): Norah Corder James's *Sleeveless Errand*. The reasons offered for the novel's state censorship are, as we shall see, well recited but poorly documented speculation. More significantly, *Sleeveless Errand* never received republication in Britain, suggesting that, perhaps in contrast to Hall's work in particular, the secondary dynamic

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<sup>1</sup> As noted below, there are two Bourdieu works on censorship to which I will mainly refer: first, his essay, "Censorship and the Imposition of Form," which originally appeared as part of his 1975 article "L'Ontologie politique de Martin Heidegger," and has been translated into English as part of the 1991 collection, *Language and Symbolic Power*; second, Bourdieu's 1972 study, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (translated in 1977). Written within a two year period, these works are foundational to Bourdieu's "major contribution," writes Richard Jenkins, "to the debate about the relationship between structure and action"—"the key question for social theory" (1).

of censorship, the potentially orthodox discourse of reception, plays out significantly in terms of James's work. The professional discourse and the "sanctions," to use Bourdieu's terminology, by which it prohibits or authorizes forms of expression ("Censorship" 138), affects not only the awareness and understanding of this particular novel but transforms the categorization of James's larger output as a twentieth-century author also.

The suppression of *Sleeveless Errand* in particular documents the parallel operations of both institutional arbiters of cultural expression, state and critic, and their concomitant discourses of agreement, allowance, and value. Together, criticism and censorship administer, as Richard Burt notes, the regulation of cultural expression, a cooperation that "disturbs the assumptions [. . .] that there are stable oppositions between" them (xv-xvi); this is certainly a traceable dynamic in the British reception of James's novel, which reminds us of criticism's ability, and even tendency, to serve as what Bourdieu terms, in his 1972 volume, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, "manifest censorship" (169).<sup>2</sup> For this novel, however, the prohibitory discourse of reception has a later stage, more a matter of academic literary historians who in their account and evaluation of the novel's state censorship often attribute a marginality onto *Sleeveless Errand* parallel to the government's interdiction; for example, Parkes notes that, while the novel's 1929 suppression "created some public interest, this novel did not bear on the evolution of modernism" (xi). Thus, seeming recuperations of the novel's reputation instead reinscribe the boundary deauthorizing *Sleeveless Errand* from entrance into the discourse of literary value, even at this late date.

The point of this essay is neither to establish whether or not Norah James's novel is "good" or "literature," nor to include it among once-ostracized, now-lionized twentieth-century novels such as *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *The Well of Loneliness*, *Ulysses*, *Tropic of Cancer*, or *Lolita*.<sup>3</sup> Instead, this essay will chart the primary, secondary, and perhaps tertiary dynamics of censorship that James's novel encounters, noting the ambivalences that a marginalized and possibly marginal novel faces as it attempts, in the United Kingdom, to gain

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<sup>2</sup> Helen Freshwater, by way of Sue Curry Jansen, notes a similar parallel between what she calls overt state (or "regulative") censorship and the covert, "implicit" power of "constitutive" censorship secured by "other systems of authority" (227). See also Jansen (57-59).

<sup>3</sup> As noted before, see Parkes and Scanlon for discussion of Lawrence and Hall; Doan and Prosser, "Introduction," and Ingram, discuss Hall alone. Dennison presents analysis of the publication of Joyce's and Nabokov's novels. Earl Hutchinson's *Tropic of Cancer on Trial: A Case History of Censorship* (Grove P, 1968) remains a touchstone for Miller scholars.

access to the kind of cultural expression best embodied by formal, physical publication and distribution. If, as Christian Metz writes, “[a]ll we ever know of censorship are its failures,” then the suppression of *Sleeveless Errand*, the novel’s apparent lack of influence, and our resulting ignorance of James and her work not only signals but reveals the modality of British censorship’s success (*Imaginary* 255).

### Woman’s Novel Seized

The history of the novel’s state suppression is unique in the terms of its speed and comprehensiveness; as a matter of *de facto* post-publication censure, the British government acted in a manner that practically erased the very act of publication itself, disrupting the novel’s effective entry into what Jürgen Habermas classifies as the “public sphere in the world of letters” (29-31).<sup>4</sup> On 20 February 1929, at 6:00 p.m., police began their successful seizure of 517 copies of *Sleeveless Errand* “on the ground that the novel was of an obscene character” (“Seized”): first, according to Scholartis Press publisher Eric Partridge, they confiscated the stock “of the two biggest exporting booksellers,” and then at 8:00 p.m., “two plain-clothes men” appeared at Partridge’s flat and demanded that he escort them to the press’s office, whereupon “[t]hey removed all of the copies from 30 Museum Street and noted the name of every bookseller to whom the book had been delivered” (*First* 25). According to the *New York Bookman*, “all the bookshops which had received advance shipments were raided. [. . .] Outside the small shop of a bookseller who had left a copy of the book in his window on display while he took his Thursday holiday, a guard from Scotland Yard was posted from Wednesday night to Friday morning so that no one might remove the copy” (“Chronicle and Comment” 190). Furthermore the *London Mercury* reported that “[a] review copy was traced to a reviewer: the police called imperatively at the reviewer’s house, and induced her to give up her copy. It had never been exposed for sale, and it was her property—or, arguably, pending her writing of a review, that of the paper, which had sent it to her” (“Editorial Notes” 563). “The book might have been, which it wasn’t, the most indecent book on earth,” the *Mercury* noted, yet “we are not aware of any law which forbids the citizen to possess indecent books” (“Editorial Notes” 563). The state, it seems, took a different view.

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<sup>4</sup> Pre-publication censorship may lead to an element of self-censorship on the part of an author, a dynamic that Marshik terms “censorship dialectic” in which an author’s compositional negotiations with “resistant readers,” those aligned with the forces of moral conservatism and state censorship, contribute “to the shaping of modern literature and the public personae of artists” (*British* 14-15).

While a transcript of the novel's prosecution survives, the actual Home Office file for the *Sleeveless Errand* action has been either lost or destroyed (Marshik, *British* 118), so the historical record of the state's intent and implementation depends mainly on the contemporary press accounts and recollections of those involved. According to the *Times* report of the 4 March 1929 Bow Street Police Court hearing one month after the seizure, the prosecution, Mr. Percival Clarke, insisted that the novel "could only have a degrading, immoral influence, and [. . .] tended to excite unhealthy passions." Clarke provided the following plot synopsis:

The story concerned a period of two days, and was told in the form of conversations by persons entirely devoid of decency and morality, who for the most part were under the influence of drink, and who not only tolerated but even advocated adultery and promiscuous fornication. Filthy language and indecent situations appeared to be the keynote of the book. ("Seized")<sup>5</sup>

Specifically, the prosecution protested that the book took the name of God or Christ in vain over 60 times, as in the line, "For Christ's sake give me a drink." The magistrate, Graham Campbell, concluded that the book was obscene and ordered that the 517 seized copies—of a total first edition of 750—be destroyed.<sup>6</sup> Thus ended the only British edition of James's *Sleeveless Errand*.

### "A very interesting novel very well written"

According to Bourdieu, "[c]ensorship also determines the form of reception," which for James's novel would be the response of

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<sup>5</sup> *Sleeveless Errand* tells the story of Paula Cranford, who, deeply saddened over the end of a romantic affair, decides she no longer wishes to live. As she plans her suicide (by driving a rented car over a cliff), Paula by happenstance becomes acquainted with Bill Cheland, who has just discovered his wife's betrayal. Over the next 48 hours, the pair commiserate over their bad fortune, as they tour London's demi-monde with some of Paula's somewhat dissolute friends and acquaintances. As the novel progresses, Bill and Paula form a suicide pact and share a chaste night in bed. On the way to the coast, the car breaks down in Hove, where Paula saves Bill's life by demanding he return to his wife. She then steers the repaired Vauxhall off a chalky South Downs cliff into the sea.

The novel is reminiscent of Michael Arlen's *The Green Hat* (1924) (which features both dissolute Londoners and the death of its female protagonist by automobile) and prefigures aspects of Waugh's far less sentimental *Vile Bodies* (1930) (which also highlights drunkenness, automobiles, and female drivers).

<sup>6</sup> While the *Times* claims the first edition was only 500 copies, Partridge notes that there were "750 copies out altogether" (*First* 25). Pearson asserts that, as pre-orders were strong, Partridge printed a second edition of around 200 copies before the book went on sale: he estimates 785 of a total of 799 were confiscated and destroyed (66).

contemporary critics, book reviewers who determine a new work's quality and worth—or legitimacy, as Bourdieu often puts it (“Censorship” 139). These reviewers, as an institutional body, produce a professional discourse “of a duly formal nature, that is, bearing the set of agreed signs” that both authorize their discourse and determine the discourse’s formal reception (Bourdieu, “Censorship” 139). The state suppression, as the *Mercury*’s anecdote concerning the reviewer’s copy documents, clearly intended to influence and control by legal means this “field of opinion” (Bourdieu, *Outline* 168).

In actuality, one of *Sleeveless Errand*’s most significant critical evaluations took place before the novel’s printing. James first submitted her novel to her employer, Jonathan Cape, for publication. Edward Garnett, an influential figure in 20th-century British publishing known for his editorship of Joseph Conrad, D.H. Lawrence, and Ford Madox Ford, among others, gave the book a positive reading: “A very interesting novel very well written. It is a real diagnosis of the War generation’s neurotics, and the drama holds on to the end. The author’s technique is admirable” (qtd. in Partridge, *Three* 24).<sup>7</sup> Although he “read it and [. . .] like[d] it,” Cape declined to publish the book, saying to James, “you see, doing the publicity work for our authors here—well, you know what some of them are like? If your book was a success, they might think you’d neglected them for your own work” (James, *Democracy* 227).<sup>8</sup> Leonard and Virginia Woolf also declined to publish the novel through their Hogarth Press; after the suppression, Woolf herself called *Sleeveless* “vulgar” but found “nothing in it to raise a hair” (29). Partridge, who seems to have been aware of Garnett’s earlier judgment, accepted the manuscript and sent James a £25 advance, which, as she writes, “felt as if it were a hundred” (*Democracy* 228). Throughout this process, during which “[t]he book had been read by a number of well-known literary people,” James reports, “no one had suggested that I should make any cuts in it”—no one seemed to think that the book was or even might be considered obscene (*Democracy* 230).

While the pre-publication discourse surrounding the novel may have authorized it with a certain amount of legitimacy, the post-publication situation was far more problematic. As bibliographer Neal Pearson notes, “strictly speaking” the Scholartis edition of the novel

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<sup>7</sup> Pearson believes that, despite what Partridge writes, “Garnett couldn’t possibly have thought *Sleeveless Errand* was any good: his recommendation [. . .] must have been made because he saw commercial potential both in its ‘daring’ subject matter, and in the fact that its author was a woman” (64). Unfortunately, Pearson does not provide evidence for this hypothesis.

<sup>8</sup> See also Howard 111-112.

“was never published” (80). The absence of *Sleeveless Errand* as a readable text, especially for reviewers, as the state made a particular effort to confiscate those often-complimentary copies, created an unusual situation for the early stages of the novel’s reception. Not only does the critical discourse, as with many state censored works, determine the legitimacy of the work in question but it also functions as one process by which the state action itself is legitimized, re-legitimized, or protested. However, the concrete effects of the suppression of those review copies seem to have delimited the very nature of this field of opinion, circumscribing a smaller socio-cultural territory in which to determine even an orthodox, conventional judgment. Although after the suppression Desmond MacCarthy praised *Sleeveless*’s edificatory value (“I know several sensible parents who have borrowed it to lend it to their children,” he insists [327-328]), only two reviews appeared: while Arnold Bennett in the *Evening Standard* thought the novel, with its realistic dialogue, “reveals a new talent for fiction” (249), the *Spectator* plainly panned the book. The *Mercury*, while criticizing the police confiscation of review copies (“[t]he police here were gagging a member of that jury which should be regarded as the safeguard of artists and the public”), asserted that “there were words in it which nobody can use in public without a risk of being charged in police court, and there were scenes in it which were outrages against decency. The author may have meant no harm, and may have thought that she was merely being frank: but there never was a censorship which would not have suppressed her book” (“Editorial” 562-563). The *Mercury*, under the editorship of J.C. Squire, could advocate conservative and reactionary opinions concerning new writing; the unsigned reviewer’s attempt to delegitimize *Sleeveless Errand* relies on both innuendo and the insistence that the undiscussed, that which must be banned, remain outside Bourdieu’s orthodox “universe of possible discourse” (*Outline* 169). Thus the suppression cannot help but be attributed to James’s own supposed naïve or superficial—but ultimately heretical—attempt at “being frank,” her taking a casual and callous attitude in matters that by their very unorthodox nature prevent identification and continued discourse.

The relatively minor attention paid to the novelistic text itself—as opposed to the political and historical conditions of the state censorship—paradoxically calls attention to those processes by which literary expression is given value. According to Bourdieu’s analysis, the standards imposed and enforced by any institutional orthodoxy, in this case the “established” world of British literary journalism, create a “manifest” or “structural” censorship in which there are

accepted, “official” ways and methods of expression (*Outline* 169; “Censorship” 138). Both the subject matter of discourse and the rules for discourse itself are determined by these rules, which also rely on an underlying “field of doxa,” that which is taken for granted and beyond question (*Outline* 169). Yet despite this absolutism, and its attendant criteria, any “recognition of legitimacy” on the part of the orthodoxy, any judgment of appropriateness or value, relies on the simultaneous “misrecognition of arbitrariness” of the very doxic standards themselves (*Outline* 168). As the rules of authorization are as much about the authorization itself as the standards by which it is awarded, a fundamental inconstancy underlies any judgment made by the British reviewing establishment.

Aspects of the American reception of *Sleeveless Errand* suggest this arbitrariness on the part of those few post-publication British reviewers. In fact, Garnett’s literary endorsement was echoed in many of novel’s reviews, particularly in the American press where more reviewers had much greater access to the text (the U.S. edition, with its changes and “deletion of only three words” [Craig 82], was, in fact, something of a best-seller).<sup>9</sup> *The New Republic* thought that “the wonderful thing about” the “book is that it carries conviction” (Matthews 187), and the *New York Times Book Review* found that “[t]he prose in ‘Sleeveless Errand’ is direct, strong and frank: the conversations seem particularly apt; there is no flinching in the face of probable truth. [. . .] Miss James is an artist as well as a writer of a first novel. She arouses those ancient cathartic emotions, pity and fear, in the reader” (“‘Sleeveless Errand’”). A *New York Bookman* review panned the novel (99), but the next month the periodical printed a puff-piece praising *Sleeveless* as “an excellent counterpart to *All Quiet on the Western Front* (“Chronicle and Comment” 190). Certainly these reactions to the novel’s content, positive or ambivalent as they may be, could acknowledge some subtle differences between the American and British reviewers. Yet they also suggest, given modernism’s historical propensity for Anglophone censorship to cluster around certain cultural works, that *Sleeveless Errand*’s obscenity—that justification for both Britain’s state censorship and its professional literary evaluations—may be a more fluid, or arbitrary, criteria than the field of discourse acknowledges.<sup>10</sup>

If the three edited words that constitute the difference between the American and British editions of *Sleeveless Errand* marked the

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<sup>9</sup> Marshik reports that *Sleeveless Errand* sold 20,000 copies in the US, although her source is uncited (“History’s” 159).

<sup>10</sup> In Jonathan Green’s *Encyclopedia of Censorship*, *Sleeveless* is compared to *Ulysses*, although the reasons for this are not quite clear.

border between legitimacy and obscenity, then the post-publication trajectory of the novel could be a matter of expurgation rather than suppression. Indeed, those rather more familiar with the immediate details of the novel's production and distribution see the obscenity matter as far more negligible: simple copyediting could eliminate the indecency, for as Pearson notes, "[e]ven by the standards of 1929 the language of *Sleeveless Errand* is not extreme" (65). Soon after the British suppression, Jack Kahane published (as part of a venture that would evolve into the Obelisk Press) a Paris edition of the novel that sold "like mitigated wildfire at a hundred francs a copy" (around US\$75.00 today for a first edition of over 1000 copies); he also thought that, in James's work, "[u]ndoubtedly one or two words fell under the ban of the law"—although he also believed the words could have been edited out with little detriment to the work overall (223-224).<sup>11</sup> The author herself echoes Kahane in her 1939 autobiography, the perhaps ironically titled *I Lived in a Democracy*:

[I]t was called an obscene book—simply because of the words used in it. I would have cut them out willingly if I'd been told it was necessary. But I'd never been told that. It never occurred to me that it would be considered obscene to let the characters in it use the language they use in real life. However, the Home Office apparently considered it so. (230)

According to both the author and her publishers, the vocabulary, if crude, was not intentionally obscene, and if there had been a sense that the work was to be censored, changes could easily—and might even willingly—be made. While these assertions are mainly made after the fact of the suppression, they still have some relevance for the novel's post-publication circumstances, suggesting the relative ease with which a future British edition might appear. But as it stands since the night of the Home Office's actions, the novel remains unpublished and undistributed in the United Kingdom.

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<sup>11</sup> Pearson lists the following potentially offensive words: "'bloody hell,' 'balls,' 'homos,' 'whores,' 'for Christ's sake,' 'like Hell' and 'bitch' is as 'obscene' as the language gets, and while 'bloody' gets a good airing, most of the other epithets appear no more than a couple of times each in a book more than two hundred pages long" (65). Similarly, Bennett's 1929 review notes that many of the novel's characters are "of a familiar type of persons who cannot express themselves at any time on any subject without employing words beginning with 'b'" (249). *Twentieth Century Authors* suggests that "the theory is that the objection was to one word in the book" (716)—"balls." Perhaps this detail of the suppression motivated Richard Aldington to write his 1931 satiric pamphlet, *BALLS, and Another Book for Suppression*, in which he considers—as part of an overwrought sports pun—, "the Purity of our Public and private life with balls" (5).



### For 'diplomatic,' not moral reasons

The *Mercury's* reaction against *Sleeveless Errand* suggests the dynamic Bourdieu delineates where censorship "is the structure of the field itself which governs expression by governing both access to expression and the form of expression, and not some legal proceeding which has been specially adapted to designate and repress the transgression of a kind of linguistic code" ("Censorship" 138). When agents such as *The Mercury* fulfill their discursive purpose by enforcing the dominant cultural forms of discourse production and reception (as "members of that jury," to use their own words ["Editorial" 563]), no longer does state censorship need "to manifest itself in the form of explicit prohibitions, imposed and sanctioned by an institutionalized authority," for it relies on more indirect mechanisms (Bourdieu, "Censorship" 138). British censorship itself relied quite heavily on such an indirect system in the 1920s, as even government authorities would reveal.

The Conservative Home Secretary from 1924 to 1929, William Joyson-Hicks, Lord Brentford, claims in his 1929 pamphlet, *Do We Need a Censor?*, that in fact outright, explicit censorship of books does not exist in Britain: "If I understand the word rightly, censorship, whether of books, pictures, films or stage plays and like, implies a scrutiny by some central authority of the whole output, with a view to the discovery and suppression of such as offend against the standard for the establishment of which censorship is imposed" (9). Thus, as there is no government office that actively and purposefully reviews every published book, he continues, there is no censorship of books (Joyson-Hicks 9-10). However, the Home Office, under the 1857 Obscene Publications Act, has to perform "when a request for advice was received or a complaint was made," and this was the case with both *The Well of Loneliness* and *Sleeveless Errand*: both of these complaints came from the critical book-reviewing establishment (Joyson-Hicks 15). The November 1928 prosecution of *The Well* came about after James Douglas railed against the novel in the pages of the *Sunday Express*, but of course, unlike *Sleeveless*, Hall's novel had been published and widely reviewed by this time. According to a number of accounts, *Sleeveless Errand* was submitted to the Home Office by a reviewer who had received an advance copy ("Editorial" 563), and in light of the conflicting opinions concerning the book's obscenity, "[i]t has been suggested," Alec Craig writes, "that personal motives played a part in the prosecution" (81). In 1930, Partridge himself recounts that "[s]omebody in a certain newspaper (for 'diplomatic,' not moral reasons) sent a marked copy to the Home Office on the morning of the 19th February," only a day

before the police action (*Three* 25). Two years later he would claim that James's novel was sacrificed not only because "a respectable journal wished to maintain the good opinion of its respectable readers" but also because of "political reasons, 'obscenity' being a mere pretext" ("Literary" 40). However, Partridge does not detail the intrigue that may have led to the suppression, and Kahane, ever the political conservative, doubted "that such Star Chamber methods could exist in the England of our time" (223).<sup>12</sup>

Star chambers do suggest a more centralized and hierarchical mechanism of manifest censorship in the case of *Sleeveless Errand* than that which has been mapped hence far, and there are, at this point, suggestions that the book's suppression was motivated by more conspiratorial, state-sanctioned motivations. Other contemporaries did note the Home Office's unusually zealous moralistic, perhaps even politically suspect, activism. According to the 9 March 1929 *Saturday Review*:

[. . .] if every fussy reviewer is going to post off his copy of a new book to the Home Secretary because he does not like an episode here or a line there, then a new statute is necessary which shall firmly distinguish between the sale of literature and the commerce of filth. But we cannot look to the Home Secretary to do the work properly, for, when he has cast himself to play Hercules and cleanse the literary stables, he makes such odd mental gestures that he cannot be taken as anything but first clown. (309-310)

And the journal feared that the *Sleeveless Errand* suppression boded poorly for the nation's future: "That is life to-day in Texas, where they, indeed snoop to conquer; will it be life in England to-morrow?" (309). If the Home Office action lacked a clear and obvious target in *Sleeveless Errand*, it seemed apparent to many people that the suppression had more disturbing repercussions.<sup>13</sup>

There is a tension, then, between the larger mapping of the British literary "field of opinion" and the satisfaction in the logic of orthodox discourse resulting within that field. British censorship not only relied on indirect mechanisms to maintain the regulation of cultural discourse; it also enacted, almost self-reflexively in the case of *Sleeveless Errand*, those prohibitions on the indirect mechanisms themselves. In other words, British reviewers demanded that the novel to be reviewed be taken from their hands. Thus the process that Joyson-Hicks claims cannot be called "censorship" becomes

<sup>12</sup> See Scott 110-112.

<sup>13</sup> Even the *Mercury*, despite its eventual approval of *Sleeveless's* suppression, worried that "[t]hese things savour too much of the old—not to mention the new—Russia" (563).

almost “perfect” or “invisible” in Bourdieu’s terminology: when agents have internalized the rules and demands of dominant discourse, the agent itself is “censored once and for all” (“Censorship” 138). And yet, at another level, that internalization reveals the discourse’s gaps, and its violence, when it more clearly parallels what Bourdieu understands as “the class struggle” between the orthodox authorized and heterodox unauthorized opinion (*Outline* 169). Simultaneously invisible and excessive, the erasure of *Sleeveless Errand* reworks a supposedly apolitical cultural discourse centered on the field of literary expression into something more overtly political, almost divorced from the domain of the aesthetic itself.

### “I realized the need for organization”

At the time of her novel’s suppression, Norah James had long been involved in leftist politics. As an adolescent, she “became interested in the women’s suffrage movement,” even dragging her mother to suffrage rallies, where, as James writes, “[s]he was horrified when she discovered that I had learned to heckle” men who “shouted an offensive or factitious remark” (*Democracy* 39-40). After studying at the Slade, James worked at the Ministry of Pensions, where she “realized the need for organization of the staff for the betterment of the bad conditions prevailing” and “became a trade union organizer [. . .] responsible for 25,000 men and women members of the clerical association” (qtd. in “JAMES” 716). Around this time she became a member of the 1917 Club, made up of Labour and Liberal political candidates and activists, and her social set included such politically minded individuals as Harold Laski, H.G. Wells, and illustrator David Low, among many others, as detailed in her autobiography (Ingram 347; *Democracy* 216-217, 256). Her political leanings were no secret.

There does not seem to be an explicit or documented connection between the British state censorship and James as a quasi-political figure, despite Partridge’s later insinuations. However, there were partisan, far-left reactions to the suppression of both *Sleeveless Errand* and *The Well of Loneliness*, as these acts were understood as what Helen Freshwater calls censorship’s “most traditional guise,” “the intervention of a representative of a repressive institution, directly linked to the state” (241). Rather than limit the censorship to the domain of an institutional discourse of literary value, T.A. Jackson’s analysis in the *Labour Monthly*, insists that there is an “easily [. . .] traced” “connection” between “the crushing of the General Strike and the miners to the banning (and burning) of the ‘Well of Loneliness’ and the ‘Sleeveless Errand’ [sic]” because “the concerted and sustained

repression of a lower class” requires extraordinary order “in the ranks of the class repressing” (235). These novels, he writes, represent “the genuine endeavour, among a section of the intelligentsia at any rate, to treat sex-relations seriously in their relation to social relations. [The Home Secretary] feels [. . .] that any fundamental critique of social-relations, and truly scientific scrutiny of conventional moral standards cannot fail, in an age of literacy and libraries, to shatter all those optimisms upon which a disintegrating social system always relies” (235). For Jackson, the suppression indicates a larger imposition of an orthodox discourse, the domain of which may not be at first easily discernible.

Two months later in *Labour Monthly*, Graham Pollard weighed in with the following:

[The authors of *The Well* and *Sleeveless*] are obscure, and their importance is due to this very insignificance. It is obvious why a capitalist government should proscribe the Statutes of the Communist International: but the prosecution of these “obscene” books must be an attempt to stop the disintegration of the bourgeoisie themselves; it is the action of an aged beauty smashing the mirror that reveals too clearly the wrinkles of her own decay. (437)

These two leftist analyses interpret an implicit cultural challenge provided by both *Sleeveless* and *The Well*: the affront to bourgeois ideology that depiction of “sex relations” in terms of “social relations,” a depiction that either reveals or accelerates the devolution of the bourgeois itself. While James’s political work in particular may suggest her underlying interest, as an author, in representing class struggle, Jackson’s and Pollard’s advocacy prefigures Celia Marshik’s 2002 argument that the novels “were prosecuted because they share two features that discomforted governmental and judicial readers: both novels contain female characters who alter their sexual behavior as a direct result of working for the war effort, and both texts indicate that young, unmarried women were particularly vulnerable to wartime and postwar transformations” (“History’s” 146). Thus, these novels suggest that sexual relations are influenced by the wartime social relations (resulting representationally in *The Well*’s explicit same-sex desire or *Sleeveless*’s miserable promiscuity), which challenges “the impact of war upon a nation” and undercuts an aspect of bourgeois ideology (Marshik, “History’s” 147).<sup>14</sup> These examinations work to reveal British censorship’s true, expanded target—particularly for James’s novel—less a matter of vulgar idiomatic slang than the

<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Ingram’s idiosyncratic 1986 reading of the novel claims that both *Sleeveless* and *The Well* were considered obscene because the novels challenged heterosexual patriarchy: “all is not well in mummy-and-daddy and patriotic-sons land” (352). See also Parkes (n15, 207).

repression of radical representation. The very stuff of either novel is too unsettling for conservative, mainstream consumption, at least according to the institutionalized cultural arbiters.

The coupling of *Sleeveless Errand* with *The Well*—as opposed to other suppressed and controversial works—follows logically given the timeline of the state actions: both trials occurred within five months of each other. Other factors suggest a certain similarity beyond their challenging content. James’s career as a jacket and advertisement designer at Jonathan Cape also placed her near the epicenter of *The Well of Loneliness* suppression. According to James, when the novel first came under Cape’s consideration, “[h]e asked me if I would read it that night and let him know what I thought of it. I was mildly surprised, because this was the first time he had asked me for an opinion on an MS” (*Democracy* 211). James thought the novel “a fine and sincere piece of work,” and at this time she “saw quite a lot of Radclyffe Hall” and “found her an extremely highly-strung woman, with one of the kindest hearts in the world” (*Democracy* 211). Angela Ingram notes that both Hall and James frequented an after-hours club started by Harold Scott and Elsa Lanchester, “the Cave of Harmony,” beloved by many other artists, writers, and members of the 1917 club (347). As James developed a personal as well as professional acquaintance with Hall, it is unsurprising that the younger woman attended *The Well* trial at Bow Street: it “was,” she writes, “the first time I’d ever been in a police court. I was chiefly surprised at the number of well-known critics who were prepared to come forward and say that the book was a piece of literature and, on those grounds, could not be condemned as a piece of obscenity” (*Democracy* 212). Of course the magistrate, Sir Chartres Biron, did not allow the defense to call witnesses, and a similar defense strategy for James’s own novel would lead nowhere.

James’s interest in *The Well of Loneliness* trial aside, the contrasts between the two state actions, denoting a move from public sensation to private suppression and erasure, suggest a possible strategic evolution in British censorship. The contrasts continue as we chart the novels’ later publication histories and receptions, for a key occurrence is the 1949 appearance of the Falcon Press British edition of *The Well*: the republication was simply unprosecuted by the Home Office without comment (Baker 353). Consequently, *The Well* gains a sense of cultural legitimacy that state censorship heretofore denied, although this republication is not often acknowledged as a watershed moment in literary history. Doan and Prosser, for example, suggest that *The Well* would have greater influence when “published in paperback” in Britain during “the early fifties” (14-15), while Marshik

elides the question of both *The Well* and *Sleeveless's* republication by noting that “[w]hile we cannot know the exact numbers, [foreign] editions of both novels found their way into Britain” (“History’s” 159). But the example she gives as evidence is the oft-noted 1932 discovery of a copy of *The Well* in a telephone box: there are no such anecdotes concerning James’s work, nor is there ever republication. *The Well of Loneliness*, as that former public (and possibly notorious) sensation, significantly returns to print, and *Sleeveless Errand* remains marginalized. In fact, James’s 1941 novel, *The Hunted Heart*, does not even list *Sleeveless* among the frontispiece listing of her published novels, as if the title itself would be unrecognizable to the reader. Again, the British suppression of James’s novel seems simultaneously over determined and fully complete.

A possible justification for *Sleeveless Errand's* continued absence as a British text is the matter of the work’s value as a work of art, as a literary novel. Parkes’s brief dismissal—that *Sleeveless* “did not bear on the evolution of modernism” (xi)—may well be accurate, but the judgment itself seems dependent on the suppression’s success. Here literary history, as a matter of an institutional orthodoxy, replicates the state’s violence with what Bourdieu considers the “symbolic violence” explicit, if often misrecognized, in any discourse of legitimacy (“Censorship” 139-140). Simply put, the logic of literary authority suggests erased works have little influence, and as *Sleeveless Errand* was absented, it is no longer worth considering: the novel is trapped in a literary historical double-bind.<sup>15</sup> And when scholars and critics make the infrequent attempt to divorce the novel from its literary historical context, to read it as an autonomous work, *Sleeveless* does no better. Pearson, for example, suggests that “James may not have been the world’s greatest writer” and declares *Sleeveless* “a deeply terrible book, maudlin, melodramatic, and fatally upstaged by its obvious and unabsorbed influences” (413). Again, appealing to republication as a marker of legitimacy, he also notes that of her 70 authored novels listed in the British Library catalogue, “[n]one is in print” (Pearson 413). The reputations of many previously censored twentieth-century works are often a matter of extended, serious critical discourse as yet unresolved; Terry Castle, for instance, notes that *The Well* is “quite possibly the worst novel ever written” (394-395). And yet that novel is a matter for consideration and discussion; it has entered into literary studies’ ideological discourse, the discipline’s field of opinion. The seeming prohibition against *Sleeveless Errand* “is perhaps an

<sup>15</sup> Absence, again, signifies this dynamic of exclusion. For example, although Marshik’s 2003 essay (re)establishes important connections between *Sleeveless* and *The Well*, James’s novel barely registers notice in the more canonically (and literarily) focused *British Modernism and Censorship* (2006).

indictment of the narrow focus of contemporary literary analysis,” according to John Shapcott, for Arnold Bennett’s 1929 “recognition of the novel’s raw power has not been subsequently pursued” (93-94). Shapcott’s observation validates Bourdieu’s analysis: criticism and its effects may function as a form of manifest censorship.

Investigating the strategies behind and procedures of the state censorship of *Sleeveless Errand* does not lead to a necessary recovery of the text: unlike D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, and to some respect, Radclyffe Hall, Norah James does not stand as an “important” author in twenty-first century orthodox cultural discourse. Her work, like many other so-called popular authors of the previous century, sold well; her novels saw print well into the 1970s, although at the end, her hardback publisher was the Valentine Club, a romance imprint. As Pearson sums up James’s professional life, “mostly, she wrote” (433).

It is hard to evaluate James’s life-long career in light of the *Sleeveless Errand* suppression. At one level, it did not affect her overall production, her longevity, or her general reputation. Among her works there are novels, books for young adults, cookbooks, and memoirs: she was denied few audiences as a professional writer. The notoriety of her first novel’s suppression seems not to have cast a particularly long shadow. In fact, her second novel, *Hail! All Hail!* appeared within the year, published by Scholartis; if some sort of personal or partisan vendetta motivated the state action against *Sleeveless Errand*, it was by no means a sustained attack against James herself or her publisher. More to the point may be James’s literary reputation and her loss of that artistic promise suggested by Garnett’s early reading of the *Sleeveless* manuscript or Bennett’s praise in the *Evening Standard*. Literary history, then, certainly suggests that the aim of the original state censorship—to exclude James’s work from being considered, from the universe of possible discourse—has been successful and continues to be more fully carried out by extra-legal institutional arbiters, whether they be contemporary reviewers or the academy itself. The “quality” of the novel, its ability to be understood as “literary” rather than “commercial” or “popular” simply evades analysis, as *Sleeveless Errand* occupies a paradoxical Bourdieuan rhetorical field: we cannot tell whether the present orthodox verdict is a recognition within the field of opinion of the work’s actual merit or a result of the earlier censorship’s influence and continued control of the field of discourse.

Near the end of *Sleeveless Errand*, the novel’s protagonist, Paula Cranford, laments the devolution of postwar Britain and her own corruption. The wartime sexual freedoms have been replaced with social punishments, war work is supplanted with unemployment, and the

promised postwar social reconstruction is not going to happen at all (*Sleeveless* [Scholartis] 223-225). She continues:

Of course, I know some women have won through all right. The new mothers have, and a tiny band of women who have got some profession they're dead keen on. But it's in the next generation of children that the chance of a better future lies. The only thing my sort can do is to contaminate them as little as possible. (*Sleeveless* [Scholartis] 226)<sup>16</sup>

Still quarantined from literary expression as represented by formal, physical publication and distribution, the novel in which Paula appears has yet to "contaminate" the United Kingdom.

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<sup>16</sup> For these passages, see also the Paris Kahane edition (202-205) and the US Morrow edition (234-237).



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