

‘Physical disability’ or ‘hypochondria of pinchbeck passion?’: The role of sexology in the diagnosis of a lesbian identity in Britain, 1900-1930

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Introduction

In 1928 the British government was forced to confront female homosexuality during the obscenity case against Radclyffe Hall’s novel, *The Well of Loneliness*. The publishers, Jonathan Cape, argued that Hall had produced an honest account of sexual inversion; a medical congenital abnormality or ‘physical disability’, and was justified in informing her readership and pleading for social acceptance.¹ Meanwhile, sections of the mass media reported that female homosexuality was nothing more than ‘a sort of hypochondria of pinchbeck passion’, implying that same-sex female relations were a flawed and temporary imitation of heterosexuality.² Both descriptions originated from theories of the homosexual circulated in the medical community since 1900; the former, which left the ‘invert’ innocent, and the latter, which named a new and dangerous ‘pervert’. This paper shall argue that by 1930 the authorities had utilised the sexological language to make the separate models synonymous, and were able to diagnose and condemn a visible female homosexuality.

Existing studies of lesbian history are invaluable but have often been overshadowed by an effort to create a wider ‘lesbian and gay’ narrative which has led to oversimplification. Whilst the LGBT+ community is a force for strength in modern-day culture, a unified past is ahistorical. As Merl Storr commented, ‘the body of scholarship known as “lesbian and gay studies” has produced a “lesbian and gay” history of sexuality – including sexology – which has unwittingly flattened out some of the history’s contours’.³ It needs to be acknowledged that the chronological paths taken to an LGBT+ present are highly gendered and therefore disparate. Michel Foucault’s theory of sexuality suggested that the increasing scientific study of sex in the early 20th century transformed homosexuality from an act into an identity.⁴ Historians such as Jeffrey Weeks utilised this theory to create a narrative for male homosexuality which neatly tracked the positive progression of the ‘sodomite’ to ‘homosexual’; the ‘pervert’ to ‘invert’.⁵ Yet, this narrative does not fit women. Female homosexuality was never made illegal in Britain, so sexology formed the first public acknowledgement. Far from being a key stage in the formation and liberation of the homosexual, for women, sexology marked a diagnosis of abnormality and public condemnation of a previously invisible behaviour.

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¹ National Archives, London [hereafter NA], HO 144/22547, ‘The Well of Loneliness by Miss Radclyffe Hall: obscene publication; order by Chief Magistrate for destruction 16 Nov 1928’, letter from Messrs Jonathan Cape Ltd. to Home Secretary William Joynson-Hicks, 20 Aug. 1928.

² ‘Current Literature: The Vulgarly Of Lesbianism’, *New Statesman*, 25th Aug. 1928.

³ M. Storr, ‘Transformations: Subjects, Categories and Cures in Krafft-Ebing’s Sexology’, in L. Bland and L. Doan (eds.), *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 11-27, p. 12.

⁴ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* trans. Robert Hurley (London, 1979).

⁵ J. Weeks, *Coming Out* (London, 1977).

There are several key case studies which have been simplified to apply the 'lesbian and gay' progressive narrative to women's experience: sexology emerged in 1900, was utilised in the libel case of (in)famous dancer Maud Allan in 1918, which in turn paved the way for the emergence of the blatant invert Radclyffe Hall and her protagonist, Stephen Gordon. This historical narrative has been incorporated in later developments of the lesbian community, and credited for the origins of the 'butch/femme' coupling.⁶ However, such a reading has streamlined the origins of lesbianism, and ignored the multitude of possibilities for female same-sex desire in the period 1900-1930. Even the majority of lesbian, feminist historiography fails to acknowledge not only how overwhelmingly heteronormative the sexological construction of the lesbian was, but how one-sided. Despite extensive care and effort by academics to define the varying degrees of masculine lesbianism, little study has acknowledged the feminine lesbian, though she surely did exist. She is proof of alternative queer identities; not visibly homosexual, but not heterosexual either. These women have been ignored by history – regarded alternatively as victims, manipulators, and heterosexuals.

When studying the history of sexuality and gender it is essential to establish and define terminology so as not to risk ahistoricism. Lesbian historiography has conscientiously avoided anachronism whilst still attempting to narrate a consciously 'lesbian' history. Lillian Faderman's iconic study focussed on 'romantic friendships', and stressed the potential of both emotional and physical intimacy between women without the conscious adoption of a homosexual identity.⁷ Adrienne Rich, meanwhile, in 'Compulsory Heterosexuality' (1980) theorised the 'lesbian continuum'; a model which allows for the placing of all women throughout history on a scale of 'lesbian' feeling or activity, without forcing the historian to make definite assertions.⁸ The Medievalist Judith Bennett offered the most accepted term of 'lesbian-like', which allows for both the claiming of a lesbian past, with the constant reminder of the instability of the term.⁹ Bennett argued that 'no word has transparent meaning, now or in the past, surely we need not single out "lesbian" as a word that must be proscribed'.¹⁰ This paper shall acknowledge the historiographical debates which have occurred since the emergence of lesbian history as a discipline and embrace Bennett's sentiment, but will utilise the technique of the Early Modernist Valerie Traub.¹¹ In *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, Traub wholly embraced the word 'lesbian' but italicised it at every use, to highlight the instability of the term. The direct use of the italicised *lesbian* in this paper also hopes to evoke queer theory; the incongruous formatting highlights the incongruous nature of the word, and works to destabilise the accepted historical heteronormative narrative.

The Sexological Invert

Sexology was an essential component of Foucault's renowned *History of Sexuality*: the relationship between patient and sexologist resembled that of confessional and Catholic priest in pre-

⁶ M. Vicinus, "'They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong": The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity', *Feminist Studies*, 18 (1992), pp. 467-497.

⁷ L. Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Love and Friendship Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York, 2001).

⁸ A. Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', *Signs*, 5 (1980), pp. 631-660.

⁹ J. M. Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like" and the Social History of Lesbianisms', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 9 (2000), pp. 1-24.

¹⁰ J. M. Bennett, 'Remembering Elizabeth Etchingam and Agnes Oxenbridge', in N. Giffney, M. M. Sauer and D. Watt (eds.), *The Lesbian Premodern* (Hampshire, 2001), pp. 131-143, p. 138.

¹¹ V. Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2002).

Reformation Europe and created an acceptable space to discuss sex.¹² With this, Foucault challenged the 'repressive hypothesis' that sex went undiscussed until the late 20th century, and instead that 'scientia sexualis' represented an enlightenment. Figures such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and his theory of the third-sex Uranian, or 'Urning', in his pioneering studies (1864-5), or Magnus Hirschfeld and the establishment of the 'Institut für Sexualwissenschaft' (the 'Institute for the Science of Sexuality', 1919-1933), certainly did represent a revolutionary study of sexuality and marked a transition of knowledge from religious to secular. According to Foucault, a range of new sexual identities were produced and individuals learnt to recognise themselves 'in the impersonal, medical descriptions'.¹³ However, it is important to note that while the impact of sexology was evident in Europe, in Britain its presence was less obvious. Sexological research was limited to the medical community and was more often treated with distaste than interest. In 1896 *The Lancet* described Havelock Ellis and John Addington-Symonds' *Sexual Inversion* as a subject which 'touches the very lowest depths to which humanity has fallen'.¹⁴ In 1898, *Sexual Inversion* was banned in Britain after being deemed 'obscene' and Ellis was forced to publish in America.¹⁵ Moreover, despite the *British Medical Journal's* [BMJ] opposition to the obscenity ruling, Ellis's theories were rejected and it was upheld that homosexuality was linked to degeneration and sickness, in concurrence with *The Lancet's* view that Ellis failed to 'convince medical men that homosexuality is anything else than an acquired and depraved manifestation of the sexual passion'.¹⁶ Despite Ellis now being regarded as a leading British sexologist it is clear that at the time his influence did not live up to the Foucauldian narrative.

The work of Havelock Ellis was pioneering, if not initially accepted. *Sexual Inversion* was published in 1896. Building upon Ulrichs' 'Urnings', Ellis described the invert as a sexed body with the opposite gendered soul. A congenital invert was born with this diametric combination and was unable to change their innate behaviours and desires towards the same sex. Ellis described the female invert through case studies and concluded that they were interested in traditionally masculine pursuits from a young age but were harder to identify than male inverts because of the lack of criminal status.¹⁷ Such women often dressed in male attire when possible or were indicated by their 'brusque, energetic movements, the attitude of the arms, the direct speech, the inflexions of the voice, the masculine straightforwardness and sense of honour, and especially the attitude toward men, free from any suggestion either of shyness or audacity'.¹⁸ There was also the implication of physical difference, through firm muscles and a deep voice.¹⁹ Edward Carpenter published sexological work ten years after Ellis, and pursued similar theory. In *The Intermediate Sex*, Carpenter described a true female invert as an 'aggressive person, of strong passions, masculine manners and movements, practical in the conduct of life, sensuous rather than sentimental in love, often untidy, and outré in attire; her figure muscular,

¹² Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 6.

¹³ R. Felski, 'Introduction', in L. Bland and L. Doan (eds.), *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 1-9, p. 2.

¹⁴ 'Editorial on the publication of Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion*', *The Lancet* (1896), as printed in L. Bland and L. Doan (eds.), *Sexology Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 51.

¹⁵ J. Bristow, 'Symonds's History, Ellis's Heredity: Sexual Inversion', in L. Bland and L. Doan (eds.), *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 79-100, p. 80.

¹⁶ C. Beccalossi, 'Havelock Ellis: Sexual Inverts as Independent Women', in S. Tiernan and M. McAuliffe (eds.), *Tribades, Tommies and Transgressives; History of Sexualities: Volume 1* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2008), p. 216; 'Editorial', *The Lancet* (1896).

¹⁷ H. Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion* (Philadelphia, 1901), p. 121.

¹⁸ Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, p. 140, p. 143.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

her voice rather low in pitch; her dwelling-room decorated with sporting-scenes, pistols, etc'.²⁰ On one hand it appears that these theories of the female congenital invert offered a radical identity to the female homosexual. On the other, deviant desires were repackaged to fit the heteronormative couple (one invert as the 'male' partner, with a 'female' lover). Yet even so, if Foucault was right and sexology did eventually disseminate and was utilised by individuals to identify themselves, the female invert could indeed form the origins of the modern *lesbian*.

However, there is an important flaw in the sexological theory and subsequent historiographical conclusions. When constructing the masculine female invert, the sexologists found themselves at a loss to explain the apparently 'normal' female partner. To fit the heteronormative model they had created, the partner of the invert could not be an invert herself; she must be feminine, yet still attracted to women. Ellis clearly struggled in his description and contradicted himself when attempting to describe their physical appearance: 'they are women who are not very robust and well developed, physically or nervously, and who are not well adapted for child-bearing, but who still possess many excellent qualities, and they are always womanly'.²¹ It is apparent that a man such as Ellis could not conceive of a woman/woman relationship without a male figure, and equally could not imagine a woman who, despite being 'normal' in almost all visible and psychological characteristics, would choose a female over a male partner. This is due in part to previous centuries' constructions of the 'tribade' in which women could only partake in same-sex acts if one partner had an oversized clitoris, and there could be penetrative intercourse.²² The phallogentric conceptions of sex lived on, yet the existence of the physically endowed tribade was undermined by the growing acknowledgement of the hermaphrodite and, as such, medical commentators were often at a loss to understand or explain *lesbian* sex. Due to this uncertainty, the invert's partner (or in other words, the 'female' partner) received only a page's worth of attention in *Sexual Inversion*, and Ellis's lack of sympathy and understanding is encapsulated in his suggestion that 'they are the pick of the women whom the average man would pass by. No doubt, this is often the reason why they are open to homosexual advances'.²³ It is this problem of the non-inverted female homosexual which challenges Ellis's sexological model. But consideration of such women's existence proves the availability of multiple *lesbian* identities. Whilst the Foucauldian development of sexual science did create and name identities, it also maintained knowing silences and flexibility.

Whilst sexological theories were not initially adopted in wider society, ideas slowly gained traction throughout the period 1900-1930. Yet by 1930, the masculine woman was understood as a combination of congenital and acquired homosexuality. This combined figure worked to stereotype and condemn the female homosexual. Marked from birth, the invert was most definitely 'other' from society.²⁴ Yet she was undeserving of sympathy because of her *chosen* perversion. An article published in the *BMJ* in 1922 epitomises this characterisation: that inversion could be accepted as a 'state or condition', but if someone who was afflicted acted on their desire then they were a 'sexual pervert'.²⁵ This model of the invert allowed for a visible figure to be persecuted; a masculine woman was clearly recognised and

²⁰ E. Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women* (1908), p. 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Medieval origins of phallogentric sex explained in: E. Benkov, 'The Erased Lesbian: Sodomy and the Legal Tradition in Medieval Europe', in F. C. Sautman and P. Sheingorn (eds.), *Same Sex Love and Desire Among Women in the Middle Ages* (Hampshire, 2001), pp. 101-122.

²³ Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, p. 133.

²⁴ Stephen Gordon remarked she was afflicted as 'The Lord set a mark upon Cain', in R. Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (London, 2008), p. 231.

²⁵ 'The Interstitial Gland And Sex Problems', *British Medical Journal*, 1 (1922), p. 973.

avoided, and could be used as a deterrent to the 'normal' woman. Such a model was utilised in the condemnation of *The Well of Loneliness*. In a statement given by leading practitioner in mental and nervous disorders in 1928, Maurice Beresford Wright, O.B.E. claimed:

There are the active Lesbians, and those who yield to the active ones and are regarded as passive Lesbians. The active Lesbian is practically always abnormal, that is, she has male instincts, desiring to satisfy them by association with females. She is, to use a common expression, a "hunter," and is on the look-out for the rather younger, weaker, more yielding, more genuinely feminine women, whom to seduce and persuade into yielding towards her Lesbian desires and acts, which is, in a sense, comparable to the action of a man in persuading a woman to yield to his sexual acts.²⁶

Hostility to the idea of sexual inversion as an affliction rather than conscious decision is also evident in the reaction to Carpenter's work. Whilst *The Intermediate Sex* was not banned as *Sexual Inversion* was, it received unfavourable recognition from the medical community. In 1909 a *BMJ* book review began with a mocking rhyme, poked fun at the origins of the term 'Urning' (implying it came from 'urinal'), and claimed that 'these articles reiterate *ad nauseum* praise and laudation for creatures and customs which are generally regarded as odious'.²⁷ Both Ellis and Carpenter were motivated to write such work to challenge the 1885 Labouchere Amendment which made any sexual interaction between males illegal which had led to Oscar Wilde's guilty verdict.²⁸ Whilst such motivations were noble and fit cohesively with the male homosexual Whiggish narrative, the sexological theories actually worked to implicate women in homosexual acts for the first time and at last created a visible female homosexual, leaving any independent woman vulnerable to accusation.

Feminism and Backlash

Thus far it has been shown that sexological theories were not widely accepted by the medical community and that, despite the radical nature of said theories, they were ultimately founded upon heterosexuality. This section will highlight issues which made the legacy of sexology even more complex, and problematize its place in the history of homosexuality. Firstly, the 'masculine woman' of the early 20th century emerged simultaneously in a different form: the suffragette. This powerfully independent female figure served to question the gender norms which sexual inversion theory relied upon. Secondly, the libel case of Maud Allan is considered; as a theatrical dancer neither Allan nor her supposed lovers were recognisable as 'inverts', and offer an alternative *lesbian* identity in the period. Lastly is the proposed law amendment of 1921 which would have made female homosexuality illegal on the same grounds as male. The failure of the Bill to pass again reveals the ambiguous, diverse nature of *lesbian* relations in the period and the struggle of the authorities to define characteristics which could identify them.

Suffragism began to gain popularity as a movement from the late 19th century and campaigned for the education and welfare of women as well as the priority of the female vote, alongside the development of sexological thought. Sheila Jeffreys forcefully argued in *The Spinster and her Enemies*

²⁶ NA DPP 1/88: 'HILL, L, B, and another Offence: Obscene publication "The Well of Loneliness"', statement from Maurice Beresford Wright, OBE, 1928.

²⁷ 'The Urning and the Carpenter, Were sitting hand in hand, They wept because Homogeny, Is generally banned.': 'The Uranian', *British Medical Journal*, 1 (1909), p. 1546-1547; *Ibid*.

²⁸ D. Cohler, *Citizen, Invert, Queer: Lesbianism and War in Early Twentieth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis, 2010), p. 4.

(1985) that the two were closely connected. From her perspective of radical second wave feminism, Jeffreys argued not only that female sexuality had been defined by privileged white men, but that homosexuality had been utilised as tool by sexologists as a smear campaign against suffragism.²⁹ In intervening decades, Jeffreys' uncompromising narrative of sexology as misogynistic has been challenged, yet strengths remain.³⁰ For example, Carpenter's understanding of female Urnings is based on the belief that women had been 'oppressed and unfairly treated by men', causing them to draw 'more closely together and to cement alliances of their own'.³¹ The connection between a *lesbian* woman and a suffragette continued into the century, with the *New Statesman* commenting in 1928 (the advent of female suffrage for all women over 21) that the 'vulgarity of lesbianism', had 'original roots no doubt in the professional man-hating of the Pankhurst Suffragette movement'.³² In addition, Jeffreys coined the term 'pseudohomosexual' to describe the 'passive' *lesbian* partner; one 'real' invert could cause *lesbianism* to spread among normal women, with suffrage circles being particularly susceptible.³³ Yet, her definition holds less similarities to the 'femme' model of *lesbianism*, and more to her own construction of the 'political lesbian' within the Women's Liberation movement.³⁴ Therefore this adds an extra complication; alongside the congenital invert and passive partner, there was the potential for a strategic *lesbianism* deliberately employed to disrupt patriarchy.

There was a more connected relationship between sex and gender in comparison to modern scholarship which allows for separate schools.³⁵ As Laura Doan argues, 'there was far more fluidity around notions of gender inversion, gender deviance, and sexuality', and it is with such fluidity that the history of *lesbianism* should be written.³⁶ There have been several (often controversially received) attempts to unearth the *lesbian* past of many prominent political women in the period, such as Octavia Wilberforce, Louisa Garrett Anderson and Louisa Martindale.³⁷ But, as Judith Bennett warned, there is the risk of creating 'a fetish rather than a history', if too much artistic license is employed in retelling histories without source authority.³⁸ For example, Octavia Wilberforce spoke openly about her overwhelming affection and love for her companion, Elizabeth Robins, and commented in her diaries that her parents grew concerned about their attachment.³⁹ Yet her 1950s autobiography had the benefit of hindsight and as such she was careful to make clear that her earlier affections were not 'homosexual'.⁴⁰ However, her disgust at the possibility of marriage in her youth was still startlingly; the 'horror' and 'revulsion' at the thought of being bound to a man certainly begs a more complex reading

²⁹ S. Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930* (London, 2003), p. 128.

³⁰ L. A. Hall, 'Feminist Reconfigurations of Heterosexuality in the 1920s', in L. Bland and L. Doan (eds.), *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 135-150, p. 136.

³¹ Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex*, p. 78.

³² 'Current Literature: The Vulgarity of Lesbianism', *New Statesman*, 25 Aug. 1928.

³³ Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, p. 107.

³⁴ See for example: The Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, *Love Your Enemy? The Debate Between Heterosexual Feminism and Political Lesbianism* (London, 1981).

³⁵ See for example: J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London, 1990).

³⁶ L. Doan, 'Topsy-Turvydom: Gender Inversion, Sapphism, and the Great War', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12 (2006), pp. 517-542, p. 523.

³⁷ See: L. A. Hall, *Sexual Cultures in Europe: Themes in Sexuality* (Manchester, 1999); M. Pugh, *The Pankhursts: The History of one Radical Family* (London, 2001), with criticism: J. Purvis, 'Pugh's book is full of errors', *The Times*, 25 Jan. 2002.

³⁸ Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like'", p. 14.

³⁹ LSE Women's Library, London [hereafter LSE], 70CW/FL558, 'Octavia Margaret Wilberforce', *The Eighth Child: Part 1*, p. 50.

⁴⁰ LSE, 70CW/FL558, *The Eighth Child*, p. 204.

than assumed heterosexuality.⁴¹ Therefore, historians should be wary of applying hetero- or homosexual readings onto such historical figures, and instead be open-minded to more complex readings that work outside established orientations. Jeffreys was right to identify the sexist bias and the ability of the authorities to use the threat of *lesbianism* as a deterrent to women who were sympathetic to the suffrage cause, but it did not mean that *lesbianism* did not exist within suffragism. Instead, there were more flexible identities available to women, conforming neither to the sexological definitions of a self-conscious identity, nor to the innocence of female friendships.⁴²

Another major contributing factor to shifting gender roles was war. Women were key workers in wartime industry with 7,310,500 in some form of war work in 1918.⁴³ The war represented a Bakhtinian carnivalesque period, and it is possible that true inverts thrived during WW1 due to the requirement to exploit their practical masculinity but such toleration was limited in time and not synonymous with homosexuality. As historians of gender have commented, it was difficult for women to lose the social standing they had gained in the war and return to domesticity after a period of independence.⁴⁴ At the time, medical commentators went so far as to suggest psychological implications which would mean that 'modern social conditions are compelling women more and more to model themselves on men, which, except in rare cases, inevitably causes intrapsychic conflict and division of interest', indicating that the female mind was actually altered.⁴⁵ Some also suggested that due to the imbalanced ratio of men returning from the Front, some women were forced out of the heterosexual couple, unclaimed due to the decreased of pool of potential husbands. Writing a decade after the war, Lillian Barker CBE, governor of H.M. Borstal for Girls, gave a statement of professional opinion on the 'phenomena' of *lesbianism*. She claimed that 'the moment is one of great danger, when there are nearly two million women with what are purely natural instincts, which cannot be satisfied by reason of the surplus of women over men'.⁴⁶ She indicated that population imbalance caused *lesbian* behaviour, implying that any single woman could be suspect. Therefore, the women who worked in traditionally masculine professions as well as those who were left single after the war further complicated the preconceived model of female homosexuality. They may have aroused suspicion contemporarily, but without a widely understood model of female homosexuality, nothing could be done to police them.

The perfect example to illustrate the combination of fear of female autonomy and the post-war moral panic of an unstable Britain is found in the 1918 libel case of the professional dancer Maud Allan. Allan was Canadian-born and well known for her performance of *Salome*, an adaptation of Oscar Wilde's stage-play performed in 1918 at the Royal Court Theatre. However, in February, Noel Pemberton-Billing published an article, 'The Cult of the Clitoris' in his newspaper *The Imperialist*, which implicated Allan as a *lesbian*. The 'Cult' of which he wrote was an extension of a story published in January, which reported the existence of a German 'Black Book' containing 47,000 British names susceptible to blackmail due to their 'perverse' sexual desires.⁴⁷ Pemberton-Billing's attack was carefully constructed

⁴¹ Wilberforce was 'staggered by the horror of such thoughts' in LSE, 70CW/FL558, *The Eighth Child*, p. 84, similar to Stephen Gordon's 'dumb horror' at being proposed to in: Hall, *The Well*, p. 105.

⁴² Interestingly, there was a simultaneous moral panic in America due to the rise of companionate marriage and the figure of the 'flapper', as shown in Christina Simmons, 'Companionate Marriage and the Lesbian Threat', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, 4 (1979), pp. 54-59.

⁴³ Doan, 'Topsy-Turvydom', p. 517.

⁴⁴ For example: S. Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England 1918-1950* (London, 2005).

⁴⁵ 'Discussion On Psychotherapy', *British Medical Journal*, 2 (1922), p. 550.

⁴⁶ NA DPP 1/88, statement from Lillian Charlotte Barker CBE, 1928.

⁴⁷ D. Cohler, 'Sapphism and Sediton: Producing Female Homosexuality in Great War Britain', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 16 (2007), pp. 68-94, p. 87.

and claimed Allan to be 'a lewd, unchaste, and immoral woman and was about to give private performances of an obscene and indecent character, so designed to foster and encourage unnatural practices among women, and that the said Maud Allan associated herself with persons addicted to unnatural practices'.⁴⁸ The article never became more explicit, and instead used knowing allusions to the play and the legacy of Oscar Wilde.⁴⁹ With support, Allan sued Pemberton-Billing for libel and was brought to court in June 1918. In her study of the case, Lucy Bland argued that it was 'the first British trial in which the defendant drew on sexology as a part of his defence'.⁵⁰ Indeed, Pemberton-Billing based the majority of his accusations on the fact that Allan had read works of sexology and was familiar with terminology. There was hesitation to even read the word 'clitoris' aloud in court and at one stage the judge questioned the meaning of 'orgasm'.⁵¹ Although Pemberton-Billing won the case, it was because he chose to revoke his accusation of *lesbianism* altogether.⁵² The theory around sexology was still so vague as to fail to create a criminal profile that Allan could fit; as a seductive dancer she did not resemble the masculine woman, and her 'immoral' familiarity with terminology failed to resonate with a court who did not understand it themselves.

Moreover, Allan's supposed lovers failed to fit the framework of inversion. The most famous was Margot Asquith, wife of the Liberal ex-Prime Minister, who paid for Allan's Regent's Park apartment for twenty years.⁵³ Judith Walkowitz argued that the connection between Allan and the Asquith's was made as a deliberate attempt by Pemberton-Billing to implicate the former Prime Minister as vulnerable to German influences.⁵⁴ As such, this formed another reason for Pemberton-Billing to abandon his explicit accusations of *lesbianism*. If the wife of the British Prime Minister could be guilty of *lesbian* behaviour, then surely any woman could be suspected of perverse desires and create a mass moral panic. Other members of the audience were not named, but a report in the *Daily Chronicle* noted that the vast majority were women to the extent that 'it might have been a suffragist meeting'.⁵⁵ This link to suffragism indicates how public women-only activity was viewed with suspicion. The threat of the 'invisible' *lesbian* increased, with Pemberton-Billing having little proof to paint Allan or her lovers as inverts. Furthermore, Marie Stopes's famous sex manual, *Married Love* was published in early 1918, which included explanations of human anatomy, including the clitoris.⁵⁶ As such, if knowledge of the word was enough proof of *lesbianism*, then an extensive number of women were accusable as circulation of the marriage guide led to a sixth edition by the end of the same year. More importantly, it was again a blindly phallogocentric view of sex which impeded the labelling of female homosexuality; without an explicit act, such as sodomy, male authorities failed to find a solid accusation to level at

⁴⁸ 'Vision of Salome: Honour of a famous dancer impugned', *News of the World*, 2 Jun. 1918.

⁴⁹ A. Oram, "'A Sudden Orgy of Decadence": Writing about Sex between Women in the Interwar Popular Press', in L. Doan and J. Garrity (eds.), *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and National Culture* (Hampshire, 2006), pp. 165-180, p. 170.

⁵⁰ L. Bland, 'Trial by Sexology?: Maud Allan, Salome and the "Cult of the Clitoris" Case', in L. Bland and L. Doan (eds.), *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 183-199, p. 183.

⁵¹ Bland, 'Trial by Sexology?', p. 192.

⁵² L. Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (West Sussex, 2001), p. 33.

⁵³ Jennings, *Lesbian History of Britain*, p. 95.

⁵⁴ J. R. Walkowitz, 'The "Vision of Salome": Cosmopolitanism and Erotic Dancing in Central London, 1908-1918', *The American Historical Review*, 108 (2003), pp. 337-376, p. 371.

⁵⁵ Walkowitz, 'The "Vision of Salome"', p. 360.

⁵⁶ E. M. Holtzman, 'The Pursuit of Married Love: Women's Attitudes toward Sexuality and Marriage in Great Britain, 1918-1939', *Journal of Social History*, 16 (1982), pp. 39-51, p. 41.

Allan. The 'unnatural passions' went unnamed, and therefore added to the invisibility of the female homosexual.

The moral panic created by the possibility of the invisible *lesbian* was clear in the 1921 debates which surrounded the Criminal Law Amendment Bill. On 3rd August, the House of Lords debated the Bill in relation to Clause 3, which read that 'any act of gross indecency between female persons shall be a misdemeanour, and punishable in the same manner as any such act committed by male persons under section eleven of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1885'.⁵⁷ This would have made female homosexual behaviour illegal to be in line with male homosexuality. The debate began with reluctance to speak of 'a most disgusting and polluting subject', and the Earl of Malmesbury believed that the best course of action was to wait until 'these unfortunate specimens of humanity exterminate themselves'.⁵⁸ There was a unanimous belief that the majority of women could not even comprehend *lesbianism*, as the Lord Chancellor commented that 'of every thousand women, taken as a whole, 999 have never even heard a whisper of these practices'.⁵⁹ As such the Clause was rejected and the entire Bill was thrown out. Yet it was not only due to the Lords' disbelief and disgust, but also the knowledge that it would be 'extremely difficult to get any evidence against persons accused of this offence'.⁶⁰ Due to the lack of understanding about what sex between women would look like, as well as the absence of visual indicators to reveal such women, the House could see that to pass such a Bill would be to increase discussion whilst actually inhibit the ability to police such relations.

The Well of Loneliness

Due to growth in moral panic which surrounded female suffrage and deviant sexualities, alongside the failure to pass legislation in 1921, there was an increasing need for a language with which to talk about *lesbianism*. In 1928, the vocabulary of inversion and the image of the masculine woman became suddenly commonplace both in official channels and the mass media thanks to the publication and subsequent banning of *The Well of Loneliness*. Radclyffe Hall's novel follows the life of a woman named Stephen Gordon, the quintessential model of Ellis's female invert, and the trials she must face to cope with her 'burden' of nature, ending in the loss of her true love, Mary Llewellyn.⁶¹ Laura Doan and Rebecca Jennings have both argued that *The Well* symbolised the emergence of female homosexuality as 'a pivotal event in crystallising notions of the modern lesbian'.⁶² Jeffrey Weeks commented that the case against *The Well* and Radclyffe Hall was 'for women, an equivalent social impact to the one the Wilde trial had for men'.⁶³ Whilst it is true that *The Well* represented an integral part of the history of the female homosexual, Hall's legacy has not been equal to that of Oscar Wilde.⁶⁴ Because the novel and publishers were on trial rather than Hall herself, female homosexuality was not under scrutiny in the same way male homosexuality had been in 1895. Rather than acknowledgement of 'the love that dare not speak its name' in women, the obscenity trial of 1928 marked the construction of a recognisable, archetypal masculine *lesbian*. This allowed for both the social ostracism of the masculine woman as a

⁵⁷ 'Commons Amendment', *Hansard*, House of Lords Debate, 15th Aug. 1921, p. 567.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 567, 570.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 574.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 570.

⁶¹ Hall, *The Well*, p. 173.

⁶² R. Jennings, 'From "Woman-Loving Woman" to "Queer": Historiographical Perspectives on Twentieth-Century British Lesbian History', *History Compass*, 5/6 (2007), 1906; and Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, p. 1.

⁶³ Weeks, *Coming Out*, p. 101.

⁶⁴ As shown by sources in Oram and Turnbull, *Lesbian History Sourcebook*, p. 196-200.

figure of fear and condemnation, and the erasure of 'normal-looking' female homosexuals from existence. In 1928, Stephen was found guilty, but Mary was erased.

The Well tells the story of Stephen's life, with her sexual inversion evident from birth and confirmed to the reader through the study of Ulrichs and Krafft-Ebing by her father, Sir Philip. After growing up as a social outsider, Stephen finds love in the manipulative, married American, Angela Crosby, before being humiliated and rejected first by Angela and then by her own mother, Lady Anna. Stephen eventually finds success as a novelist and explores the Bohemian *lesbian* subculture in Paris before serving as an ambulance driver in WW1. There she meets Mary Llewellyn, who becomes her partner in post-war France. Eventually Stephen decides that she cannot give Mary the happiness she deserves and deliberately drives her into the arms of a man, Martin, by pretending to have an affair with another woman. Stephen is then left alone and pleads to God for 'the right to existence' for herself and other inverts. Hall used Stephen's tragic tale to evoke sympathy for the female invert and explain that homosexuality was innate. Interestingly, despite the later controversy, *The Well* initially received favourable reviews, with claims that the novel 'handles very skilfully a psychological problem which needs to be understood in view of its growing importance'.⁶⁵ Many approved of the explicit connection to sexological expertise, as the *Daily Herald* claimed 'she has given to English literature a profound and moving study of a profound and moving problem', whilst the *Tatler* suggested that 'certain facts must be faced and, however unpleasant they may be from the normal point of view, it is better to face them – and to seek to understand them – than to persecute them ruthlessly'.⁶⁶

However, the inevitable backlash came with James Douglas's infamous review in the *Sunday Express* on the 19th of August, in which he claimed he would rather 'give a healthy girl or boy prussic acid' than *The Well*.⁶⁷ Douglas attempted to refute the theories of inversion, and argued instead that homosexuals were 'damned because they choose to be damned, not because they are doomed from the beginning'.⁶⁸ Following such a review the government intervened and the Home Secretary William Joynson-Hicks requested that the publishers should withdraw the novel because he believed that 'the book would tend to corrupt the minds of young persons if it fell into their hands'.⁶⁹ They agreed but sent moulds to France, and on 5th October 250 copies were intercepted at Dover and shortly after, proceedings began against Jonathan Cape under the Obscene Publications Act 1857. It was heard that 'these unnatural offences between women which are the subject of this book involve acts which between men would be a criminal offence, and involve acts of the most horrible, unnatural and disgusting obscenity'.⁷⁰ In fact, *The Well* is infamous for its *lack* of any sexual content, the most explicit reference being between Stephen and Angela when 'she kissed her full on the lips, as a lover'.⁷¹ However, for the newspaper readers who would greatly outnumber those who read the actual novel themselves, *The Well* was indeed portrayed as gratuitous perverted smut. Far from being given a liberating voice, *lesbianism* was at once thrown into public knowledge and condemned alongside sodomy. Once the initially accepting reviews were forgotten, 'inversion' became synonymous with 'perversion', and the masculine woman became a figure of condemnation rather than acceptance.

The shifting definitions of sexological terms are essential to note when studying this case. Although historiography is very conscientious around the use of the term 'lesbian', other words such as

⁶⁵ 'Banned Book Republished', *Daily Express*, 4 Oct. 1928.

⁶⁶ *Daily Herald*, 20 Aug. 1928; *Tatler*, 15 Aug. 1928.

⁶⁷ 'A Book That Must Be Suppressed', *Sunday Express*, 19 Aug. 1928.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*

⁶⁹ NA, HO 144/22547, letter from William Joynson-Hicks, 21 Aug. 1928.

⁷⁰ NA, HO 144/22547, verdict notes delivered by Sir Robert Wallace, 14 Dec. 1928.

⁷¹ Hall, *The Well*, p. 162.

'invert' are not tracked so closely. In the primary texts of Ellis and others, the model of the homosexual couple is of one partner as the 'true invert', with a gendered soul at odds with the sexed body, and a 'normal' female partner. In this dichotomy, it is implied that the true invert suffers with a congenital condition and cannot be helped, whilst the second partner is morally dubious and could be 'fixed'. However, I argue that when 'inversion' was called upon in the courts in 1928, the 'true invert' was defined as encompassing both a congenital abnormality and an immoral perversion. This allowed for the societal blame to fall solely upon her shoulders; not only was she the source of abnormality, but evoked it in others and spread the 'disease' of *lesbianism* whilst allowing for any interested 'normal' woman to be free of blame. This new definition of the invert was found in the persisting language of 'corruption' which surrounded the case. The Home Secretary continued in his condemnation of the novel and claimed that it 'supports a depraved practice and that its tendency is to corrupt, and that it is gravely detrimental to the public interest'.⁷² Royal physician, Sir William Henry Willcox described *lesbianism* as 'a vice which, if widespread, becomes a danger to the well-being of a nation, and where in history it has been prevalent in any nation this has been usually one of the indications of the downfall of that nation'.⁷³ In his verdict on 16th November Sir Chartres Biron claimed that he was 'amazed at that contention being put forward'⁷⁴ (referring to Ellis's theory of inversion) which revealed that despite the claim that the trial was about the obscene nature of the novel alone, the verdict effectively categorised female homosexuality as acquired, rather than innate.

The argument that the government used at the obscenity trial of *The Well* to make a wider statement on *lesbianism* is supported by the awareness of how much media attention the case would attract. The day after Douglas's damning review publishers wrote to the Home Secretary suggesting that 'a wide and unnecessary advertisement has been given to the book'.⁷⁵ On the following day, 21st August, the Director of Public Prosecutions, Sir Archibald Bodkin, also advised that 'a prosecution would undoubtedly give the book further advertisement'.⁷⁶ Yet, the publicity already received from the *Sunday Express* article, combined with the pre-existing anxiety from the Maud Allan case and the 1921 debates meant that it would be prudent to make a stand against certain behaviours. The enactment of the Representation of the People Act which granted the vote to women on equal grounds to men in July 1928 would have also caused uncertainty around the increasing independence of women. To create a verdict which allied the masculine woman with perversion would be to stigmatise both female homosexuality and female independence. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that a presiding judge Sir Robert Wallace labelled *The Well* as 'more subtle, demoralising, corrosive, corruptive, than anything that was ever written'.⁷⁷

In her study of the 1928 obscenity case, Esther Newton argued that 'the existence of a lesbian who did not feel somehow male was apparently unthinkable for Hall' and that 'Mary's real story is yet to be told'.⁷⁸ It is certainly true that the character of Mary received no attention either at time or in historiographical analysis since, which is a great oversight. For the authorities, this allowed for the blame for *lesbianism* to fall solely on the masculine woman. Because the trial was against the publication rather than the content itself, the story was referred to in relatively brief terms, but enough to reveal a very specific reading and bias. In *The Well*, Angela Crossby is manipulative and very much

⁷² NA, HO 144/22547, letter from William Joynson-Hicks, 22 Aug. 1928.

⁷³ NA, DPP 1/88, statement from Sir William Henry Willcox, 1928.

⁷⁴ NA, HO 144/22547, statement delivered by Sir Chartres Biron, 16 Nov. 1928.

⁷⁵ *The Daily Express*, 20 Aug. 1928.

⁷⁶ NA, HO 144/22547, letter from Sir Archibald Henry Bodkin, 21 Aug. 1928.

⁷⁷ "'Well of Loneliness' Appeal Fails', *The Manchester Guardian*, 15 Dec. 1928.

⁷⁸ Newton, 'The Mythic Mannish Lesbian', p. 575.

takes advantage of Stephen, rather than the reverse. Yet when the 'Angela case' was described in court, Biron claimed that Stephen 'seduced her and persuaded her reluctantly to indulge in these horrible practices', and made much of the fact that Angela was a married woman.⁷⁹ Mary meanwhile, is admittedly described as young and innocent in the novel, but is very sure of her own mind. She tells Stephen 'all my life I've been waiting for something... I've been waiting for you'.⁸⁰ When Stephen tries to keep her at arm's length for her own protection, Mary insists on pursuing, even claiming 'I forced myself on you', and later 'what do I care for the world's opinion?'⁸¹ Yet none of this is accounted for in the court, and instead Stephen is the conniving seducer in the 'Mary incident', with Mary as an unwilling 'victim'.⁸² It was necessary for the trial to portray both Angela and Mary as victims because they represented every 'normal' woman in society and if they could be guilty of homosexual desires, then by implication any woman could be a *lesbian* with no visible indicators. With Stephen as the only aberration in an otherwise feminine and traditional womanhood, the possibility of 'decent' women committing homosexual acts was negated.

Such a model was also applied to the press coverage of 'female husbands'. The case of a female husband had long been a staple story for the tabloid press, with the eventual discovery of true gender portrayed as a pantomime device of mistaken identity.⁸³ Yet in the two years between 1928-9, there were two cases which were treated with greater severity. In April 1928, the case of Lillian Arkell-Smith was reported, in which she was revealed as living under the pseudonym of Colonel Victor Barker since 1922. After being arrested on bankruptcy charges, Barker was discovered to be a woman and transferred to a female prison. More shocking than her lengthy deception however, was her marriage in 1923 to Alfreda Haward. Haward was questioned in court, and it was revealed that not only had the two women shared a bed for five years, but that she had actually known Barker when she was still Valerie. Yet, 'in reply to further questions, Miss Haward said that Barker courted her as a man and she believed he was a man'.⁸⁴ The fact that the court was apparently prepared to believe Haward, as well as the lack of opinion from the newspaper indicates that the reader was left to deduce Haward's guilt, or believe her ludicrous innocence. Barker however, was described with exaggeration: 'the size of a Falstaff, the policeman who led her into court was puny by comparison'.⁸⁵ She was given the sole blame for giving a false statement on the marriage registry. A similar case occurred a year later when timber carter William Sidney Holton was revealed as a woman on admittance to hospital for fever. Yet in this case the 'wife's' story was even more unbelievable. Mabel Hinton apparently not only believed that Holton was a man, but that 'he' had fathered her child. The *Daily Herald* reported that Hinton claimed "Holton never aroused my suspicions in any way," said the woman. "I always believed Holton to be a man, and I cannot believe otherwise."⁸⁶ The paper described her as 'bewildered' by events. The reader would clearly infer the awareness of Mabel Hinton, and perhaps even suspect sexual contact between the two women, after implication of the child. Yet, there were no accusations of homosexuality and Hinton was able to adopt the identity of the duped wife, and maintain her status as a heterosexual woman. The definition of inversion as popularised by the obscenity case against *The Well* was therefore put into practice in these

⁷⁹ NA, HO 144/22547, verdict notes delivered by Sir Robert Wallace, 14 Dec. 1928.

⁸⁰ Hall, *The Well*, p. 339.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 352, 353.

⁸² NA, HO 144/22547, verdict notes delivered by Sir Robert Wallace, 14 Dec. 1928.

⁸³ For extensive examples and context, see Alison Oram, *Her Husband was a Woman! Women's gender-crossing in modern British popular culture* (Oxon, 2007).

⁸⁴ "'Col. Barker' in Dock at the Old Bailey', *Daily Herald*, 25 Apr. 1928.

⁸⁵ 'No Law Against It', *Daily Express*, 28 Mar. 1928.

⁸⁶ *Daily Express*, 10 May 1929.

cases, leaving the masculine partner to take all the blame and the 'wife' exempt from any *lesbian* implication.

Conclusion

In conclusion, multiple *lesbian* identities were available for the female homosexual. Although the most familiar figure of the archetypal masculine *lesbian* did emerge in the period 1900-1930, this only formed one option and did not necessarily inhibit homosexual behaviour. Instead, the 'passive' female partner was also an emergent figure, though received far less attention. Because *lesbianism* did not have the same long reputation and history as male homosexuality, there were not existing stereotypes such as the 'sodomite', to call upon as immoral. The ambiguity over what constituted sex between two women made it difficult to criminalise *lesbian* behaviour, and the social existence of the female homosexual was complicated further by the changing gender dynamics of war and the successful campaign for suffrage. This prompted the authorities to quell disorder by creating a scapegoat of the masculine woman, and alleviating any blame or suspicion from the 'normal' decent woman. The extent to which the intentions of the authorities were deliberate was revealed after Radclyffe Hall's death. In 1946 Una Troubridge appealed against the ban of *The Well of Loneliness* to allow for the publication of a posthumous collection of Hall's works. Her efforts were rebuffed, and the Home Office declared that 'it would be most undesirable to have the question re-opened. The 1928 proceedings provide a fixed point regarding one aspect of sexual morality in a field where it is peculiarly difficult to establish any satisfactory standards'.⁸⁷ This shows that a 'fixed point' in the history of homosexuality does not need to be a blanket change in criminal law, but that one case has the potential for a decades-long legacy.

The legacy of Radclyffe Hall and the sexual invert did mark an important historical reference for later developments in *lesbian* communities.⁸⁸ However, the history of the *lesbian* should not be limited to the emergence of a visibly masculine woman. It has been shown that there were other ways to live as a female homosexual that were invisible to the authorities. Consideration of this forgotten past is essential to modern-day perceptions of *lesbian* identity. *Lesbianism* is generally less present than male homosexuality in mainstream media, often with only undeniable, bold, stereotypical figures breaking through.⁸⁹ Various studies have produced findings which dismiss such stereotypes,⁹⁰ but perceptions remain, which can be harmful especially to young women who feel they do not conform to socially propagated models of sexuality or gender.

Ultimately, the entire history of sexuality should be studied with more flexibility and an acknowledgement of the uncertainty of the conclusions drawn from historical sources. An LGBT+ narrative does not work, and when applied can further silence marginalised groups. Although it was not the subject of this paper, the emergence of sexology can also be read as a specifically transgender narrative. Such academic work is beginning to emerge and should be embraced by the existing scholarship surrounding sexology.⁹¹ There is no reason why Radclyffe Hall cannot represent an important figure in both *lesbian* and transgender history. The multiple narratives which can be

⁸⁷ NA, HO 144/22547, Letter from the Home Office to Messrs Peter Davies Ltd. on behalf of Lady Una Troubridge, 12 Mar. 1946.

⁸⁸ Lesbian History Group, *Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History 1840-1985* (London, 1989), p. 165.

⁸⁹ 'Where Are All The Lesbians?', *The Guardian*, 26 Jul 2010.

⁹⁰ J. J. Walker et al., 'Butch Bottom-Femme Top? An Exploration of Lesbian Stereotypes', *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 16 (2012), pp. 90-107.

⁹¹ M. A. Taylor, "'The masculine soul heaving in the female bosom": Theories of inversion and *The Well of Loneliness*', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 7 (1998), pp. 287-296.

produced serve to destabilise preconceived norms and allow for greater flexibility in social labelling of sexuality and gender today.

Most importantly, as well as reconsideration of existing historical sources, there should be a wider acknowledgement of the silences in the historical record, and the potential they hold. This paper has focussed on a clear silence, that of the female invert's partner. Yet there are other women who have been unaccounted for; as Bennett suggested, the history of single women can be completely reinterpreted. Often disregarded as 'failures in a game of heterosexual courtship and marriage', when viewed through a queer lens the potential of such women is reassessed and more narratives are available aside from the 'sexless and lonely' legacy which a heteronormative model allocates.⁹² History has a duty to acknowledge individuals who did not fit the social norms and were ignored by their contemporaries. We must answer the call which was pleaded in 1928, and give them the right to existence.⁹³

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⁹² Bennett, "Lesbian-Like", 23.

⁹³ Hall, *The Well*, 496.

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