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# The Relationship Between Sexology and the Lesbian Identity in Early 20th-Century Britain

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The Relationship Between Sexology and the Lesbian Identity in Early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Britain

by  
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### *Introduction*

In 1918, well-known dancer Maud Allan brought a libel lawsuit against MP Noel Pemberton Billing. Billing was a right-wing journalist, as well as a Member of Parliament. His assistant editor, Captain Harold Spencer, wrote an article for Billing's newspaper, *The Imperialist*, titled "Cult of the Clitoris." In this article, Spencer accused Allan of being a lesbian and someone who could be easily blackmailed by the Germans during WWI. Billing's paper had recently reported its uncovering of "47,000 English men and women vulnerable" to blackmail due to their "sexual perversions"; Maud Allan was one of these women and resented the implication of lesbianism.<sup>1</sup> During the trial, the defense focused mostly on defaming Allan through "deployment of sexological terms."<sup>2</sup> Billing used her brother's murder conviction to show that mental illness ran in Allan's family. Therefore, she would be more susceptible to "unnatural vices."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Allan's performance in Oscar Wilde's *Salome* was attacked by the defense. They claimed that the show, written by known "invert" Wilde, was obscene and encouraged "obscenity among women."<sup>4</sup> Billing's accusation of Allan not only revealed her as a lesbian, potentially vulnerable to German blackmail, but educated the public, in lurid terms, about new sexological theories of perversion that were emanating primarily from Germany. German scientists, specifically Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, practically invented the field of sexology. By using "obscene" and "unnatural" sexological terms and concepts in Allan's trial, Billing could stir up popular anti-German sentiment already virulent in

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy Bland, *Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgression in the Age of the Flapper* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Lucy Bland, "Trial By Sexology?: Maud Allan, *Salome*, and the 'Cult of the Clitoris' Case," in *Sexology in Culture: Labeling Bodies and Desires*, ed. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 187.

<sup>3</sup> Bland, "Trial By Sexology," 188.

<sup>4</sup> Bland, "Trial By Sexology," 187.

Britain during WWI.<sup>5</sup> Billing's plan, however, had unintended consequences. Victorian sexology had not been widely available to the masses, especially in reference to women. By publicizing Allan's trial and the ideas of lesbianism, Billing helped "a lesbian subject emerge in public discourse" and "enabled new representations of female same-sex desire."<sup>6</sup> Billing's utilization of sexological theory to shame lesbians pushed it further into public view, assisting in the emergence of a lesbian identity in the early twentieth century. Sexological theory helped to create a lesbian subculture in Britain during the 1920s; however, radical feminist and mainstream feminist historians debated the overall benefits of sexology on women-loving-women.

Radical feminists were more likely to read ulterior motives in the sexological literature. Lillian Faderman and Sheila Jeffreys argue that the association between masculinization and "inversion" was done in order to attack the growing women's movement. The advent of the "New Woman," a woman who could live with her friends and support herself and who did not need a man, was coming to fruition during the beginning of the twentieth century. Threatened by women's independence, Faderman and Jeffreys suggest, sexologists created the "invert" to encourage women to attach themselves to men. In her book *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, Faderman claims that the sexologists, "believed there were men's roles and women's roles" that were "natural" to the sexes. Moreover, "a top item on their hidden agenda... finally came to be to discourage feminism and maintain traditional sex roles by connecting the women's movement to sexual abnormality."<sup>7</sup> Faderman asserts that as a result of the threat to the social order posed by feminism, sexologists crafted the "invert." Jeffreys maintains a similar stance in her book *The*

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<sup>5</sup> Bland, "Trial By Sexology," 187.

<sup>6</sup> Deborah Cohler, "Sapphism and Sedition: Producing Female Homosexuality in Great War Britain," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16.1 (2007): 94.

<sup>7</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 48.

*Spinster and Her Enemies*. She writes that, as a result of women's increased economic and educational opportunities, women became a "threat to maintenance of men's control."<sup>8</sup> The sexologists put forth what they did because, as Jeffreys claims, it "served to undermine the link between (women) and dilute their potential strength."<sup>9</sup> Radical feminist historians argue that the threat to the patriarchy posed by feminism caused Ellis and Krafft-Ebing to create the inversion concept. Independent women lived and worked with each other, according to Faderman and Jeffreys, and the sexologists were threatened by the potency of those relationships and their consequences, such as the disinterest in childbearing. But not all historians came to the same conclusions as the radical feminists.

Other scholars contend that the misogynistic findings of the sexologists were in line with cultural beliefs of the era. Rebecca Jennings' book *A Lesbian History of Britain* argues for a more nuanced view of the sexologists' intentions. She notes, "the belief that women could only respond to, but not initiate, sexual encounters rendered it theoretically impossible for two women to interact sexually in the absence of a man. Early sexological writings resolved this difficulty by arguing that women who desired other women possessed a masculine sexual desire."<sup>10</sup> Jennings uses the sexologists' long-held belief that women could not feel sexual pleasure without a penis involved to defend their recognition of female same-sex love. If women could not feel sexual pleasure, then those who did were considered masculine and, therefore, inverted. Harry Oosterhuis echoes this sentiment in his book *Stepchildren of Nature*. He argues that the sexologists, "strongly endorsed the belief that women...lacked intense sexual feeling and,

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<sup>8</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies* (Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex Press, 1985), 112.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, 112.

<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain* (Oxford, UK: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007), 77.

contrary to males, were inclined to chastity, love, and monogamy.”<sup>11</sup> Women who did have these “masculine” feelings were considered to be showing symptoms of sexual inversion. Jennings and Oosterhuis argue for more historical context in the study of the sexological literature than Faderman and Jeffreys use.

The scholarly literature on the relationship between sexology and lesbian identity, however, fails to focus on the sexological writing itself. Most scholarly literature focuses on the historical contexts in which the sexological studies were written, rather than on what sexologists actually said about same-sex attraction or how lesbians internalized this literature. This thesis argues that as the Victorian Era progressed, sexologists increasingly advocated more sympathy towards homosexuals. Their writings also helped to shed light on something that had not been discussed pre-sexology: female same-sex attraction. I will argue that not only was the sexological literature progressive for its time, but that some lesbians actually used sexological theory to create an identity for themselves – an identity vividly illustrated in two LGBT+ classics: Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* and Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*.

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<sup>11</sup> Harry Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry and the Making of Sexual Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 57.

*Chapter 1*

*From Pathology to Progress:  
Sexological Theories of Female Same-Sex Attraction in Victorian Era Britain*

During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Europeans witnessed the proliferation of research about sexuality. Richard von Krafft-Ebing's 1886 book *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Havelock Ellis's 1897 work *Sexual Inversion*, and *The Intermediate Sex* by Edward Carpenter in 1912 revolutionized sexual theory. One aspect of the Victorian Era that framed these sexological writings was the growing desire to medicalize "nervous disorders," mental illnesses, and the causes of criminal behavior.<sup>12</sup> Historians Lucy Bland and Laura Doan note the effects of this culture on sexologists. "In late-nineteenth century Europe," they argued, "criminology and sexology were emerging side by side, both concerned with the classification of pathology and abnormality."<sup>13</sup> The intense focus on associating "pathology" with "abnormality" and criminality inspired the sexologists' to classify female homosexuality in some way as deviant or diseased. Ellis and Krafft-Ebing believed being a true "sexual invert" was "congenital," with some people more pre-disposed to the condition than others whether through a family history of mental illness or the possession of an atypical body type. Carpenter put forward the theory of "the intermediate sex," in which a person with same-sex desire falls in the middle of his male/female gender continuum as not quite a man and not quite a woman. Each of the men put forward their own philosophies of homosexuality. They reframed the societal narrative that same-sex attraction was criminal behavior; instead, they argued that homosexuality was a medical condition. They also popularized the idea that women had sexual desire, which during

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<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 30.

<sup>13</sup> Lucy Bland, "Introduction," in *Sexology Uncensored*, ed. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 12.

the late Victorian Era, was extremely progressive. Radical feminist historians, however, deemphasize the progressive nature of the sexological research and suggest there were ulterior motives behind it that hurt the feminist cause.

Most radical feminist historians writing in the 1970s and 1980s paid little attention to how sexologists framed female same-sex sexuality, instead surmising their nefarious reasons for authoring the research in the first place. Faderman and Jeffreys, for example, believe the sexology was written as a backlash against the women's movement, while Jennings and Oosterhuis assert that it was written as a result of changing cultures of sexuality and preconceived notions about women. Over the twenty-year span between the publications of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, *Sexual Inversion*, and *The Intermediate Sex*, however, the primary arguments about female homosexuality changed drastically. According to Doan and Waters, Krafft-Ebing and his predecessors saw lesbianism as a "sickness." Turn of the century sexologists, however, framed same-sex activity "neither as an illness that needed to be cured, nor as a vice that was freely chosen."<sup>14</sup> I will argue while sexologists framed female same-sex sexual desire as "deviant," as the Victorian Era closed, many of them instead urged sympathy towards women with these desires.

Richard von Krafft-Ebing was among the first sexologists to publish a theory of lesbianism and his book is the least friendly toward female same-sex sexuality. The theory of homosexuality in his 1886 book *Psychopathia Sexualis* was one of pathology and sickness. Krafft-Ebing believed that, "notwithstanding a normal anatomical and physiological state of (sexual) organs," homosexuals developed a sexual instinct "which is the exact opposite of that

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<sup>14</sup> Laura Doan and Chris Waters, "Introduction," in *Sexology Uncensored*, ed. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 42.

characteristic of the sex to which the individual belongs.”<sup>15</sup> Krafft-Ebing tied together gender, biological sex, and sexual orientation. If women had sex with other women, not men, it went against their sexual disposition and indicated something was wrong with them. He wrote, “in almost all such cases, the individual subject to the perverse instinct displays a neuropathic predisposition in several directions...this anomaly of psycho-sexual feeling may be called, clinically, a functional sign of degeneration.”<sup>16</sup> To cement this theory, he claimed that some women could be raised like men and not become homosexual. What caused others to foster same-sex attraction was their “natural disposition” toward it.<sup>17</sup> Women who felt attracted to other women, in Krafft-Ebing’s eyes, were suffering from a congenital illness from their ancestors.<sup>18</sup> By framing women with same-sex attraction as diseased, he identified them as deviant.

*Psychopathia Sexualis* was released during the throes of the Victorian Era when, as Oosterhuis asserts, same-sex sexuality was transferred from the “realm of sin and crime to the domain of health and illness.”<sup>19</sup> With his findings written in this context, it made sense for his early sexological work to pathologize female same-sex sexuality. A symptom of this pathology, according to Krafft-Ebing, was gender deviance.

By equating gender deviance and homosexuality, Krafft-Ebing’s findings could have been used to police Victorian women’s behaviors. He discussed the “degrees” of homosexuality found in inverted individuals. In milder cases, “there is simple hermaphroditism.”<sup>20</sup> He argued that hermaphroditism occurred when a person had some inclinations toward homosexuality, but

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<sup>15</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis & Co., 1894), 187.

<sup>16</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 187.

<sup>17</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 190.

<sup>18</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 228.

<sup>19</sup> Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature*, 43.

<sup>20</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 187.

rarely thought about these feelings. In more pronounced cases, there are homosexual feelings and thoughts. In still more pronounced cases, “the whole psychological personality, and even the bodily sensations, are transformed to correspond with the sexual perversion.”<sup>21</sup> And finally, in “complete cases,” the physical form of the person has altered as well.<sup>22</sup> Krafft-Ebing focused mostly on the third case, in which one’s personality changes to follow its perversion. These were the ones, he argued, who were most like to prey upon those with the milder forms of homosexuality. Signs of women with a “pronounced case” included a disinterest in playing with dolls, inclination towards sciences, smoking and drinking, and the propensity to “wear her hair and have her clothing in the fashion of men.”<sup>23</sup> These women, he asserted, “feel themselves to be males.”<sup>24</sup> By equating gender nonconformity with sexual inversion, regardless of his intentions, Krafft-Ebing could have created new social suspicion and anxiety toward women who challenged Victorian gender ideology. Martha Vicinus, a radical feminist historian, touches upon this in her article “Distance and Desire.” She finds that “when women appeared to be stepping outside their preconceived social role, they were pigeonholed as sexually variant.”<sup>25</sup> The Victorian Era’s separate spheres ideology provided fertile ground for Krafft-Ebing’s writings to take root against women. Even considering its focus on deviance, however, Krafft-Ebing’s work could have been viewed as exceptionally progressive for the period in which it was written.

*Psychopathia Sexualis* was radical for its time in its discussion of homosexuality in an anti-gay society. *Psychopathia Sexualis* was first published in 1886, only one year after the

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<sup>21</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 187.

<sup>22</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 187.

<sup>23</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 280.

<sup>24</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 280.

<sup>25</sup> Martha Vicinus, “Distance and Desire: English Boarding School Friendships, 1870-1920,” in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. by Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: NAL Books, 1989), 227.

passage of Britain's Criminal Law Amendment Act. The original intention of the Criminal Law Amendment Act was to increase the age of consent for girls from ages thirteen to sixteen. For reasons still unclear, MP Henry Labouchere introduced "Section 11" to the bill, or what later became known as the "Labouchere Amendment."<sup>26</sup> This amendment allowed the prosecution of a man who "commits, or is a party to the commission by any male person of, an act of gross indecency with another male person," to which they would be sentenced to prison for no more than two years "with or without hard labor."<sup>27</sup> Because the bill did not explicitly define "gross indecency," it was easy for British law enforcement to try suspected perpetrators. By claiming that same-sex attraction was a result of degeneration, Krafft-Ebing challenged the overarching beliefs that gay men were simply depraved older men who preyed upon poverty-stricken young men. These men were not predators; they were people suffering from a mental illness. His relatively forward-thinking concepts of men's same-sex sexuality extended to women as well.

The fact that Krafft-Ebing acknowledged that women's same-sex sexuality existed at all was radical. The passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Act made no mention of women's same-sex relationships. In his article "Inventing a 'Lesbian Age of Consent,'" Matthew Waites discusses the potential reasons for this oversight. He argues, "the historical lack of legal regulation emerging with the reform and extension of criminal law in the 19<sup>th</sup> century include widespread beliefs in the essential sex differences and the passivity of female sexuality, which rendered same-sex contact between women invisible or unthreatening."<sup>28</sup> While same-sex sexuality between men was legally regulated, women's same-sex sexuality was altogether

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<sup>26</sup> Morris B. Kaplan, *Sodom on the Thames: Sex, Love, and Scandal in Wilde Times* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 176.

<sup>27</sup> Kaplan, *Sodom on the Thames*, 172.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Waites, "Inventing a 'Lesbian Age of Consent'?: The History of Minimum Age for Sex Between Women in the UK," *Social & Legal Studies* 11.3 (2002): 326.

ignored. Krafft-Ebing was radical for his time, not only with his attempts to frame homosexuality as a trait with which some people are born, but also because he drew attention to the fact that women also were sexual. The case is similar with Ellis, who can also be considered progressive in the society in which he was writing.

Ellis challenged the preconceived notions of the depraved older, gay man who corrupted poorer youths. Men suspected of harboring same-sex attraction could be prosecuted under the Criminal Law Amendment Act with little evidence. As a result, men attracted to other men needed to be extremely careful of their behavior. The Cleveland Street Scandal and Oscar Wilde's trials for "gross indecency" are examples of the persecution of gay men during the late-Victorian Era. In 1889, still only five years after the publication of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, London police discovered that some boys working for a postal service on Cleveland Street had also been working as prostitutes in a male brothel. Many high-ranking male officials and politicians supposedly frequented this brothel, including Lord Arthur Somerset and the Earl of Euston, with Prince Albert Victor rumored to have visited as well. The gossip surrounding the clientele, combined with a belief that "same-sex desire was assimilated to child abuse and class domination" led the Cleveland Street Scandal to dominate public discourse and newspapers. After all, famous noblemen who frequented brothels attended by young, working-class boys exemplified the stereotype. When put on trial for "gross indecency" in 1895, Oscar Wilde's past relationships with younger, poorer men was used to frame him as a man who needed to be stopped from "corrupting the youth."<sup>29</sup> His trial had clear links to the Cleveland Street Scandal, and these links "were pursued enthusiastically by the press"<sup>30</sup> who, according to historian Morris

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<sup>29</sup> Kaplan, *Sodom on the Thames*, 232.

<sup>30</sup> Kaplan, *Sodom on the Thames*, 236.

B. Kaplan, “trumpeted his fall” after a guilty verdict and sentence of two years of hard labor.<sup>31</sup> Once people found out that Wilde had same-sex attraction, he was tossed out of general society and his work was scorned. Ellis’s assertions that many homosexuals were “moral leaders” and “men of exceptional intellect” undermined the stereotypes found in the Cleveland Street Scandal and trial of Oscar Wilde.<sup>32</sup> By framing these men as people who are born with “sexual inversion,” Ellis, like Krafft-Ebing, challenged the idea of men with same-sex desire as those who are predatory and corrupting. They both medicalize, rather than criminalize, homosexuality. The works of Krafft-Ebing and Ellis can be considered radical for their eras, which is something often ignored by radical feminist historians. With that said, Ellis’s framing of female same-sex sexuality still can be critiqued.

Ellis’s 1897 book *Sexual Inversion* defined female same-sex sexuality in contradictory terms. He found that, “with girls...at the evolution of puberty, it is that homosexuality first shows itself.”<sup>33</sup> Two girls kissing and touching while in the same bed “is a spurious kind of homosexuality; it is merely the often precocious play of the normal instinct, and has no necessary relation to true sexual inversion.”<sup>34</sup> This assertion keeps with historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s claim that pre-Victorian women routinely engaged in intimate friendships with each other without suspicion.<sup>35</sup> While Smith-Rosenberg argues that same-sex intimacy among females was not a sign of homosexuality, Ellis disagreed. He implied that the “normal instinct” of people included some homosexual desire, and same-sex intimacies were an example of this. This was a far cry from Krafft-Ebing, who defined “normal” as a person whose sexual organs had a correct

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<sup>31</sup> Kaplan, *Sodom on the Thames*, 243.

<sup>32</sup> Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 18.

<sup>33</sup> Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 126.

<sup>34</sup> Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 126.

<sup>35</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs* 1.1 (1975): 4.

corresponding gender expression and opposite sex sexual partner. Ellis's theories, however, were closer to Krafft-Ebing's than at first might appear. He noted, for example, "in the girl who is congenitally predisposed to homosexuality it will continue and develop; in the majority it will be forgotten, not without shame, in the presence of the normal object of sexual love."<sup>36</sup> While, Ellis previously noted that it was "normal" for one to feel homosexual desire, he also asserted that a "normal" object of sexual love was one's opposite sex. *Sexual Inversion* is full of inconsistent statements like this, which simultaneously normalized same-sex feelings but abnormalized homosexuality. Ellis was not wary toward only homosexual behavior, but also cast suspicion on certain physical characteristics that, he argued, were signs of homosexuality.

Ellis's theory of homosexuality, while allowing space for feminine women, followed precedent in linking a gender deviant body type with lesbians. Pseudo-inverts were women whose homosexuality "while fairly distinct, is only slightly marked" and who differed from non-inverted women by their lack of disgust for "lover-like advances from persons of their own sex."<sup>37</sup> These women were always womanly, according to Ellis.<sup>38</sup> The inverted woman, however, had masculine traits. As Ellis pointed out, "she may not be, and frequently is not, what would be called a 'mannish' woman, for the latter may imitate men on grounds of taste and habit unconnected with sexual perversion."<sup>39</sup> Yet he noted that it is common for inverted women to wear men's clothes, and demonstrate physical characteristics like "brusque, energetic movements, attitude of the arms," and "inflexions of voice."<sup>40</sup> Ellis's idea of the gender deviance of inverts was focused mostly on their physical bodies, rather than their habits. He differed in

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<sup>36</sup> Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 126.

<sup>37</sup> Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 133.

<sup>38</sup> Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 133.

<sup>39</sup> Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 134.

<sup>40</sup> Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 143.

this way from Krafft-Ebing, who discussed the habits and behaviors of women as proof of their homosexuality. While Krafft-Ebing associated homosexuality with masculine traits, Ellis believed that some feminine women, while not congenital inverts, could have same-sex sexual desire. The “organic masculine traits” of inverted women were illustrated in his case study of Miss M, a congenital woman with an “inborn organic impulse” to lesbianism.<sup>41</sup> Miss M.’s doctor found that she was “very near to being a normal woman...but with arms, palms up, extended in front of her with inner sides of hands touching, she cannot bring the inner sides of her forearms together, as nearly every woman can, showing that the feminine angle of the arm is lost.”<sup>42</sup> It was certain aspects of Miss M.’s body, not her behavior, that was evidence of her inversion. According to Deborah Cohler in her book *Citizen, Invert, Queer*, Ellis theorized every couple to be gendered: “a masculine aggressor and a passive, feminine partner.”<sup>43</sup> It is in this theory that he fit his same-sex female couple.

Ellis developed a theory of homosexuality that, while emphasizing gender deviance, did so less harshly than Krafft-Ebing. Eleven years passed between Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1886 and Ellis’s *Sexual Inversion* in 1897. In that time, Ellis’s primary focus on physical signs of sexual inversion allowed for some leeway in women’s everyday dress and behavior. Women could dress in masculine clothing or have some interests in “manly” fields without immediately being considered an “invert.” Ellis did associate “congenial inverts” with a deviant body type, however. This theory meant that women who had physical characteristics not usually associated with their sex, like large hands, feet, or a low voice, were assumed to have same-sex desire. The association between a non-feminine body and lesbianism could still be

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<sup>41</sup> Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 182.

<sup>42</sup> Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, 136.

<sup>43</sup> Deborah Cohler, *Citizen, Invert, Queer: Lesbianism and War in Early Twentieth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 13.

construed as policing women's bodies. Ellis's sexological successor, Edward Carpenter, also accepted the physical divergence of female "inverts," but no longer cast them in a negative light.

Edward Carpenter's theory of the "intermediate sex" was the most inclusive argument of homosexuality of all the sexologists. Unlike his predecessors, Carpenter's 1912 *The Intermediate Sex* did not discuss homosexuality in terms of the female invert. His theory on the matter was the existence of the "intermediate sex." He argued that with the twentieth century upon them and the popularity of the New Woman along with it, there was no reason for the sexes to be "hopelessly isolated in habit and feeling from each other," and that men and women "represent the two poles of one group – which is the human race."<sup>44</sup> While the people on opposite ends of the man/woman spectrum are very different, those in the middle are similar to each other in "emotion and temperament."<sup>45</sup> There are many people in the middle, Carpenter asserted, but some develop homosexual feelings as a result of this. By putting everyone on this gender/sexuality continuum, Carpenter was not framing those of the "intermediate sex" as much more deviant than the rest of the population; he was actually quite critical of the previous studies of homosexuality. He commented that during the times of Krafft-Ebing and Ellis, homosexuality was assumed to be a result of "disease and degeneration; but now with the examination of the actual facts it appears that, on the contrary, many are fine, healthy specimens of their sex."<sup>46</sup> Inspired by the breakdown of gender barriers at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Carpenter created a theory of homosexuality that did not identify those with homosexual desires as being sick or ill. But he still found gender deviant behaviors to associate with these people on the far "poles."

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<sup>44</sup> Edward Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women* (New York: Kennerley, 1912), 17.

<sup>45</sup> Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex*, 17.

<sup>46</sup> Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex*, 22.

Carpenter argued that, while all people lie somewhere on the gender/sex continuum, those with homosexual desire could be identified by their behaviors. For those “general” women in the intermediate sex, they were “fiery, active, bold, and truthful, with defects running to brusqueness and coarseness” and their minds were more “logical, scientific, and precise than usual with the normal woman.”<sup>47</sup> Carpenter followed this segment with examples of “extreme specimens,” in which women were “markedly aggressive...her figure muscular, her voice rather low in pitch; her dwelling room decorated in sporting-scenes, pistols, etc.”<sup>48</sup> He also asserted that these women were sexually attracted to feminine women.<sup>49</sup> This description followed the same line of thinking of Krafft-Ebing and Ellis. All the sexologists linked at least some homosexual women with gender deviance. But as the years wore on between Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* and Carpenter’s *The Intermediate Sex*, it is notable that the conception of homosexual degeneracy and pathology had shrunk. Carpenter did not mention degeneracy at all and critiqued Krafft-Ebing and Ellis for their usage of it.<sup>50</sup> Another aspect of Carpenter’s book that was unique was its outright advocacy of homosexual acceptance. Each sexologist did encourage understanding of individuals with same-sex attraction, but the extent to which they did so varied.

Sexological works published closer to the 20<sup>th</sup> century advocated higher levels of social support for homosexual individuals. Written in 1886, Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* had the least sympathy for homosexual women. For his solution to the problem of congenital homosexuality, Krafft-Ebing wrote, “there is some thought of therapy in this incurable condition, which so heavily burdens its victims, socially, morally, and mentally.”<sup>51</sup> Ironically, he then

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<sup>47</sup> Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex*, 26.

<sup>48</sup> Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex*, 30.

<sup>49</sup> Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex*, 30.

<sup>50</sup> Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex*, 22.

<sup>51</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 319.

followed this claim that homosexuality was “incurable” with different therapy options. He assured the reader that cures for congenital inversion are either “probable” or “possible” depending on one’s degree of homosexuality.<sup>52</sup> The Criminal Law Amendment Act had been passed the year before and any writings overly sympathetic to the plight of those with same-sex attraction would automatically be marked as suspicious. While he argued for the idea of homosexuality as “incurable,” the society in which he was writing most likely pressured him to discuss “cures” anyway. Regardless of contextual pressure, his frame of female homosexuals did not touch upon outright acceptance; it simply voiced warnings about therapies. Ellis, on the other hand, did call for tolerance of homosexual individuals. He opened 1897’s *Sexual Inversion* by claiming that there were inverts “honorably known in church, state, society, art, or letters” and that “in England...the law and public opinion combine to place a heavy penal burden and severe social stigma on the manifestations of an instinct which to those persons who possess it frequently appears normal and natural.”<sup>53</sup> Ellis tried to show that regular, successful people could be inverts, that they were not monsters or diseased creatures. Furthermore, the feelings they had for members of their own sex, while perhaps unusual to non-homosexual people, seemed completely natural to themselves. He attempted to humanize those with same-sex attraction in a way that Krafft-Ebing did not. Carpenter, whose book was published in 1912, advocated acceptance of homosexuals more than either sexologist. While Ellis mentioned a few times in *Sexual Inversion* about the importance of tolerance, Carpenter made tolerance a central part of his book. He attacked preconceived notions about those with same-sex desire, stating, “men and women of the exclusively (homosexual) type are by no means necessarily morbid in any way”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 320.

<sup>53</sup> Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, v.

<sup>54</sup> Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex*, 22.

and that to confuse them “with libertines having no law but curiosity in self-indulgence is to do them a great wrong.”<sup>55</sup> Whereas Ellis argued that some “inverts” were contributing members of society and tried to make the reader sympathize with them, Carpenter simply condemned the beliefs of those who did not support people with same-sex desire. However, Carpenter also tried to find common ground between those of the intermediate sex and those not. He noted, “anyone who realizes what Love is, the dedication of the heart, so profound, so absorbing... cannot fail to see how difficult, how tragic even, must often be the fate of those whose deepest feelings are destined from the earliest days to be a riddle and a stumbling-block.”<sup>56</sup> Carpenter discredited people’s stereotypes about inverts, as well as attempted to find similarities between non-homosexual and homosexual people. The levels of acceptance promoted in these books follow the Victorian social timeline completely: from Krafft-Ebing’s medicalization of homosexuality during the mid-Victorian Era, to Carpenter’s open-mindedness that marked the onset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century came to an end, sexologists reduced their emphasis on gender deviancy in females with same-sex attraction and instead began to promote acceptance. The entire segment regarding homosexuality in *Psychopathia Sexualis* was dedicated to the identification of those with diseased sexualities via their habits and behaviors. These women were extremely obvious and masculine. It is important to note, however, that Krafft-Ebing’s work was still progressive when first published. In the years following *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing actually became more vocal in support of rights for homosexual people. He was one of 6,000 physicians and scientists to sign the 1897 petition of sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld’s that challenged Paragraph 175 of the German Criminal Code; this provision

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<sup>55</sup> Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex*, 25.

<sup>56</sup> Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex*, 24.

criminalized homosexual acts between men. Krafft-Ebing claimed that the “affliction” was caused by “natural laws” and “called not for punishment or contempt, but compassion.”<sup>57</sup> His plea for better treatment of “inverts” marks a progression from *Psychopathia Sexualis* eleven years before. Ellis framed congenital inverts as women who were masculine, but the pseudo-invert was a feminine woman who could also harbor same-sex desire. The creation of the pseudo-invert marked a shift from Krafft-Ebing’s manly, diseased perception of lesbianism. But like Krafft-Ebing, Ellis was writing his research in the midst of profoundly anti-homosexual sentiment, as evidence by the Cleveland Street Scandal and trial of Oscar Wilde. Carpenter, on the other hand, assigned people to different places on a gender/sex continuum. Those in the middle were more likely to partake in same-sex sexual activity. The levels of acceptance toward homosexuality progressed throughout the years as well, with next to no advocacy from Krafft-Ebing to Carpenter’s entire book almost dedicated to it. Although Krafft-Ebing and Ellis were not as radical as Carpenter, they were progressive during their own times. Changing societal norms, and the sexological push for tolerance, inspired some lesbians to adopt themes of the sexologists’ writings. As writer Esther Newton claimed, some feminists “embraced, sometimes with ambivalence, the image of the mannish lesbian and discourse of the sexologists about inversion primarily because they desperately wanted to break out of the asexual model of romantic friendship.”<sup>58</sup> Women-loving women wanted some way to claim their sexuality and, regardless of the problematic themes, they found this in the sexology.

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<sup>57</sup> Hubert Kennedy, *Homosexuality and Male Bonding in Pre-Nazi Germany: The Youth Movement, the Gay Movement, and Male Bonding Before Hitler’s Rise* (London: Routledge, 2013), 14.

<sup>58</sup> Esther Newton, “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman,” *Signs* 9.4 (1984): 560.

*Chapter 2*

*“Eton-Crops” and Tailored Trousers:  
How Vita Sackville-West and Radclyffe Hall Internalized Victorian Sexological Literature*

World War I changed England’s commonly understood gender roles. While men were at the front, women donned pants and work boots to help with the war effort. They worked in factories, traveled abroad to be nurses and ambulance drivers, and helped out as secretaries and office employees. Although some Victorian women had begun the fight for independence, WWI opened up the prospect of self-reliance for many more women. This newfound independence from men was probably beneficial, as many potential husbands did not come home and those who did were scarred both physically and mentally. Post-WWI society was characterized by more fluid gender categories, roles, and behaviors. It was, as Laura Doan writes, “a time of unprecedented cultural confusion over gender and sexual identity.”<sup>59</sup> Women were now allowed to experiment with their sexualities and dress in ways that had previously been off-limits. They could wear masculine clothing, like trousers, and cut their hair into bobs. This liberalized society made it possible for lesbians to act out the “symptoms” of sexual inversion. Women-loving-women used cross-dressing as a “political strategy” to make a “public announcement of their sexuality,” while wearing traditionally masculine clothes with impunity.<sup>60</sup> Many upperclass women had access to sexological literature. Lesbians internalized this literature and it had profound effects on their physical and mental identities, as well as their creative pursuits. Radical feminist and non-radical feminist historians, however, differ about the benefits of sexological theory on the lesbian subculture.

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<sup>59</sup> Laura Doan, “Passing Fashions: Reading Female Masculinities in the 1920s,” *Feminist Studies* 24.3 (1998): 665.

<sup>60</sup> Doan, “Passing Fashions,” 668.

Most of the debates focus on whether the adoption of “masculine dress” identified by the sexologists as a sign of “inversion” was beneficial to lesbians. Doan argues that, by prescribing and outlining “symptoms” of lesbianism, the sexological literature actually helped to create a lesbian subculture. Jeffreys critiqued this argument, claiming that prior to sexology, women-loving-women were not considered unusual and, therefore, a subculture wouldn’t have been necessary at all. Debates about the effects of sexological writing on lesbian subcultures are valid. But there is little research about how individual lesbians themselves embodied the sexological literature. Changing gender and dress codes of post-WWI Britain made it possible for lesbians to try masculine clothes and actions without being suspected of “perversion.” “The pervasive phenomenon of masculine fashion for women,” asserts Doan, “allowed some women...to exploit the ambiguity” in gender categories and sexualities.<sup>61</sup> I will argue that some lesbians internalized the sexological literature and it shaped their physical appearances and sexual identities.

Vita Sackville-West used the stereotypes of the “congenital invert” to determine her behavior with her partner, Violet Trefusis. Sackville-West was born March 9, 1892 at Knole House in Kent. She grew up in an upperclass family and was a prolific journalist, novelist, and poet during her lifetime. Sackville-West was also a well-known lover of other women. Fond of reading, she kept a copy of *Sexual Inversion* by her table in her study at home in Sissinghurst Castle.<sup>62</sup> Considering her knowledge of the sexological theories, as well as her recognition of her attraction to women, Sackville-West took full advantage of the opportunities to test out her masculine identity as a “congenital invert.”<sup>63</sup> In 1918, she was reintroduced to an old friend, Violet Trefusis, and the two began a lengthy, passionate affair. When Sackville-West and

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<sup>61</sup> Doan, “Passing Fashions,” 670.

<sup>62</sup> Louise A. DeSalvo, “Lighting the Cave: The Relationship Between Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf,” *Signs* 8.2 (1982): 197.

<sup>63</sup> DeSalvo, “Lighting the Cave,” 199.

Trefusis ventured out in public together, Vita dressed in men's clothing, and asked Violet to call her "Julian."<sup>64</sup> Sackville-West herself would comment in letters, "it was easy" to dress as a boy and "how natural it all was for me."<sup>65</sup> As Karyn Sproles claims in her book *Desiring Women*, "fully aware of her masculinity, Sackville-West acted out, quite consciously, the male role in the affair."<sup>66</sup> Sexologists, and Ellis specifically, defined the female congenital invert as masculine and a woman who behaved and dressed like a man. Internalizing these theories, Sackville-West constructed a masculine persona that aligned with her beliefs of how a woman-loving-woman should act. She defined her attraction to Trefusis as "unnatural," however, and Sackville-West found that her attraction to women was of a "perverted nature."<sup>67</sup> These words suggest that, while Sackville-West made little effort to hide or stem her attraction to other women, she accepted that she was "unnatural" and "perverted," phrases and concepts common in the sexological literature. But Sackville-West also used sexology to defend her actions. In her memoir, Sackville-West wrote, "I am not saying that (lesbianism and "inverts")...will not be deplored as they are now; but I do believe their greater prevalence, and the spirit of candor which one hopes will spread with the progress of the world, will lead to their recognition, if only as an inevitable evil" and she claimed, "many more of my kind exist."<sup>68</sup> Krafft-Ebing and Ellis argued that those suffering with "inversion" ought to be treated with sympathy. But they both asserted that there was something "perverted" about homosexuality. This is the concept to which Sackville-West is referring when she calls her "affliction" an "inevitable evil." She believed so

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<sup>64</sup> DeSalvo, "Lighting the Cave," 210.

<sup>65</sup> Vita Sackville-West, *Portrait of a Marriage*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 30.

<sup>66</sup> Karyn Z. Sproles, *Desiring Women: The Partnership of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 35.

<sup>67</sup> Sackville-West, *Portrait of a Marriage*, 117.

<sup>68</sup> Sackville-West, *Portrait of a Marriage*, 106.

much in the sexologists, in fact, that she tried to look for signs of “inversion” in her childhood memories.

Sackville-West’s memoir, *Portrait of a Marriage*, was written to show signs of her “inversion” from a young age. She claimed that, as a child, “I can remember doing dangerous things on a bicycle and climbing high trees” and “I wasn’t so much of a coward, and I kept my nerves under control, and made a great deal of being hardy, and as like a boy as possible.”<sup>69</sup> Krafft-Ebing and Ellis both argued that boyish behavior, like riding bicycles and climbing trees, were symptoms of inversion. Additionally, she mentioned that her father used to talk to her about science, and that she enjoyed his company much more than her mother’s.<sup>70</sup> She also recalled how she spent her time during the Second Boer War from 1899 to 1902. She wrote about, “the trenches I dug in the garden during the war; the ‘army’ I raised and commanded amongst the terrorized children of the neighborhood; my khaki suit; and the tears of rage I shed because I was not allowed to have it made with trousers.”<sup>71</sup> An interest in science was mentioned by Krafft-Ebing as a sign of congenital inversion. Furthermore, Sackville-West’s examples of digging trenches, commanding “armies,” and wanting to wear pants all hark back to sexological writings about female masculine inverts. Wearing pants in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and fighting in wars were all manly pursuits and, therefore, signs of lesbianism. Connecting once again to sexological theory, Sackville-West compared herself to another girl who used to be her lover, Rosamund Grosvenor. Similar to her relationship with Trefusis, Sackville-West framed herself as the masculine congenital invert and Grosvenor as the “pseudo-invert.” In other words, Sackville-West was the female partner who dressed and behaved like a man; therefore, she was

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<sup>69</sup> Sackville-West, *Portrait of a Marriage*, v.

<sup>70</sup> Sackville-West, *Portrait of a Marriage*, v.

<sup>71</sup> Sackville-West, *Portrait of a Marriage*, 12.

born as a congenital invert. Grosvenor, on the other hand, was feminine and ladylike. Instead of the congenital invert, Grosvenor was the “pseudo-invert,” a woman who was primarily heterosexual but had some underlying “inverted” tendencies, acting on them only when courted by a congenital invert. Sackville-West noted, “(Grosvenor) was always clean and neat whereas I was always grubby and in tatters.”<sup>72</sup> Throughout her memoir, Sackville-West linked the sexological literature to her lived experiences. The interests and activities she discussed, as well as her cleanliness, were all signs of congenital inversion by Krafft-Ebing and Ellis. As she wrote *Portrait of a Marriage*, argues Sproles, Sackville-West “was looking for evidence of congenital inversion.”<sup>73</sup> Sackville-West’s identity as the congenital invert was illustrated once again by her relationship with her “pseudo-invert” lover, Virginia Woolf.

In 1923, Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf met at a party and the connection between the two was undeniable. They soon began an affair. Once more, Sackville-West framed herself as the “congenital invert” and her partner as the “pseudo-invert.” Woolf did not have the sexual experience, either with men or women, enjoyed by her partner. In a letter to a friend, Sackville-West wrote that Woolf’s sex life with her own husband, Leonard Woolf, was “a terrible failure.”<sup>74</sup> Sackville-West “introduced the pleasures of sapphism into Woolf’s life and into her writing.”<sup>75</sup> Sackville-West, who assumed the identity of the congenital invert, “brought an insistence on the presence of desire” between Woolf and herself.<sup>76</sup> Woolf did not identify as a lesbian and had difficulty expressing herself sexually; Sackville-West took on the masculine role

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<sup>72</sup> Sackville-West, *Portrait of a Marriage*, 12.

<sup>73</sup> Sproles, *Desiring Women*, 32.

<sup>74</sup> Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West, *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Louise DeSalvo and Mitchell A Leaska (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1985), 159.

<sup>75</sup> Sproles, *Desiring Women*, 5.

<sup>76</sup> Sproles, *Desiring Women*, 5.

of the pair, reminding Woolf of the times in which “the ceilings of Long Barn (Sackville-West’s home) once swayed above us” and focused on helping Woolf develop eroticism with her.<sup>77</sup> When writing about her feelings for Woolf, Sackville-West wrote that Woolf had “drawn and quartered” her, and “unwound and retwisted” her.<sup>78</sup> Sackville-West described her feelings for Woolf in violent terms. These words have more masculine than feminine connotations, further illustrating her adherence to the masculine “congenital inversion” theory. Furthermore, when joking with Woolf about bringing a fake lover to a dinner, Sackville-West described her ideal woman as “only nineteen, (who) has run away from her family...more lovely than Valerie... more wanton than Mary.”<sup>79</sup> While there is no explanation for the identity of “Mary,” the fact that Sackville-West wanted to be with a young, beautiful, “wanton” woman is a stereotypically masculine desire. Vita Sackville-West was well read in her knowledge of sexology and, similar to her previous relationships, embodied these theories with Woolf.<sup>80</sup> Sackville-West took the role of the sexually aggressive, masculine congenital invert, as opposed to Woolf’s pseudo-invert, passive and unsure of her sexuality. Sackville-West’s identity as the female invert, a combination of man and woman, inspired Woolf’s fiction, as well.

In *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf uses the character’s masculine and feminine characteristics to symbolize her lover. Sackville-West had a female physical body, but had male sexual desires and behaviors. The androgyny and changing biological sex of Orlando illustrated this dichotomy. Virginia Woolf published *Orlando* in 1928. The story is a fictionalized biography, following the adventures of the character of “Orlando” for 300 years, from 1500 onward. One of the most unusual characteristics of Orlando is that the character changes their biological sex from male to

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<sup>77</sup> Woolf and Sackville-West, *Letters*, 166.

<sup>78</sup> Woolf and Sackville-West, *Letters*, 238.

<sup>79</sup> Woolf and Sackville-West, *Letters*, 247.

<sup>80</sup> Sproles, *Desiring Women*, 41.

female. Woolf modeled the character of Orlando after Sackville-West, and the sexological influences in the book are apparent.<sup>81</sup> The book opens with the line, “he – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though his fashion...did something to disguise it – was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor hung from the rafters.”<sup>82</sup> “Slicing at the head of a Moor” is an extremely masculine activity. Woolf’s mentioning of Orlando’s fashion, however, challenges his masculinity and desire to engage in “manly” pursuits, as it “disguised” his identity as a man. The gender conflicting dress, behavior, and sexual identity connects to sexology. Congenital inverts were biologically one sex but behaved like the other. While Orlando is biologically male and acts like this in some ways, his fashion choices betray him as “inverted.” This concept is illustrated further when Woolf described Orlando’s “shapely legs, the handsome body, and well-set shoulders.”<sup>83</sup> All of these qualities have aspects of femininity and masculinity combined. Vita Sackville-West dressed like a man, partook in masculine activities, and behaved sexually aggressively, illustrating these qualities. However, Orlando is not the only character in the book to show signs of congenital inversion.

Woolf used the character of Princess Marousha to illustrate further the concepts of inversion, but also to show the extent of Orlando’s inversion. While at an event at the Russian embassy, Orlando sees a person ice-skating. He is enraptured immediately. Woolf wrote, “the person, whatever the name or sex, was about middle height” and “very slenderly fashioned.”<sup>84</sup> But no descriptions of this person could compare “to the extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person.”<sup>85</sup> Orlando noted the individual’s, “legs, hands, carriage, were a

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<sup>81</sup> DeSalvo, “Lighting the Cave,” 212.

<sup>82</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (London: Hogarth Press, 1928), 14.

<sup>83</sup> Woolf, *Orlando*, 14.

<sup>84</sup> Woolf, *Orlando*, 29.

<sup>85</sup> Woolf, *Orlando*, 29.

boy's, but no boy ever had a mouth like that; no boy had those breasts; no boy had eyes which looked as if they had been fished from the bottom of the sea."<sup>86</sup> Upon seeing this person for the first time, Orlando noted that he could not determine his/her sex, but he commented on the person's seductiveness, nonetheless. Instead of Orlando being disgusted by his potential attraction to another man, Woolf created a character who was not concerned about the sexual identity of a possible partner. Woolf's discussion of the mystery character's physical traits, who turns out to be a Russian princess, are notable. Princess Marousha is described as having a relatively masculine body and athletic prowess, but also feminine physical features. Similar to Woolf's original depiction of Orlando, she mixes masculine and feminine physical characteristics. Although Orlando stays a man while he is with Sasha, he does change into a woman not long after. Therefore, Sasha's androgynous physicality, combined with her relationship with a gender deviant person, is a sign of her potential sexual inversion as well. Historian Joanne Winning asserts that with *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf "inaugurates... a lesbian gender identity."<sup>87</sup> Orlando fit the theories of female congenital inversion. He dressed in androgynous clothing, as well as enjoyed traditionally feminine or masculine pursuits, but he also reacted with indifference toward the sexual identity of potential romantic partners. Sackville-West wore men's clothing, enjoyed manly activities, and had her fair share of liaisons with other women. Woolf took these aspects of Sackville-West's identity, combined with sexology, and created a fictional character with these traits. It is important to note, however, that Orlando's links to Sackville-West were clouded. Orlando was framed as androgynous, while Sackville-West dressed as a man while with her lovers; Orlando did not mind the sexual identity

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<sup>86</sup> Woolf, *Orlando*, 29.

<sup>87</sup> Laura Doan and Jay Prosser, *Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on The Well of Loneliness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 380.

of his partner, while Sackville-West was a lover of women. Because of the time in which *Orlando* was written, Woolf needed to be careful of her framing of feminism and lesbianism, which could have been met with disdain or legal bans. Sproles writes, “Woolf’s aim was to write as clearly as she could about love between women while avoiding detection, crafting works that could ‘pass’ in the dominant culture...self-censorship was a deliberate strategy to protect her work from being banned.”<sup>88</sup> Woolf’s push for subtlety was successful; *Orlando* ended up as one of her best-selling works. Not all authors took these precautions, however.

The character of Stephen in *The Well of Loneliness* was created as a result of Radclyffe Hall’s displeasure with other books about lesbians, as well as an internalization of sexological literature. According to Laura Doan, Hall wanted to write a book about “sexual inversion” that would be available to the general public.<sup>89</sup> Hall was not pleased with the common methods of writing lesbian novels, where “there was deeply coded fiction, in which (authors) used the pronoun ‘he’ to cloak their true subject.”<sup>90</sup> While not following this convention completely, Virginia Woolf did make Orlando a man in some parts of the book to symbolize lesbianism. To combat this erasure of female lesbians in literature, Hall published *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928. The novel follows Stephen Gordon, a biological woman whose parents wanted a son so badly that they gave her a man’s name. Throughout her life, Stephen faces obstacle after obstacle connected to her identity as a sexual invert. As Hall wrote about these challenges, she painted Stephen as someone who had all the signs of sexual inversion and someone who was a victim of society. The character of Collins, Stephen’s maid and the first person to whom she is attracted,

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<sup>88</sup> Sproles, *Desiring Women*, 7.

<sup>89</sup> Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 126.

<sup>90</sup> Katie Roiphe, *Uncommon Arrangements: Seven Portraits of Married Life in London Literary Circles 1910-1939* (London: Virago, 2008), 236.

commented, “doesn’t Miss Stephens look just like a boy? I believe she must be a boy with them shoulders, and them funny gawky legs she’s got on her.”<sup>91</sup> Stephen’s mother also noted masculine aspects of her daughter’s appearance, such as “a certain largeness about her, a certain crude lack of grace in her movements, a certain unconscious defiance.”<sup>92</sup> Hall’s adoption of sexological literature helped create the character of Stephen. She was written as someone who, from a young age, had a masculine physical body. Her behavior, as noted by her mother, was also considered masculine. Hall internalized the sexological messages to create not only Stephen’s identity as a congenital invert, but also her own.

Hall absorbed the writings of Krafft-Ebing and Ellis, transforming herself into a “congenital invert.” Radclyffe Hall was born in 1880 to, like Sackville-West, wealthy, upperclass parents. She identified herself as a “congenital invert” from a relatively young age, as she was well acquainted with sexological literature and “read not only with a scholar’s interest, but with a desire to understand herself... (a woman) whose sexual appetites were satisfied exclusively by other women.”<sup>93</sup> Her first great love was Mabel Batten, who was 51 years of age to Hall’s 27. The two became smitten with each other and Batten gave Hall the nickname “John,” a name she would continue to use with lovers for the rest of her life.<sup>94</sup> She was also well known for sporting the close-cropped, Eton-style haircut, as well as wearing extremely masculine clothing. As Laura Doan writes in *Fashioning Sapphism*, Hall “embraced the sexological theories of inversion”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), 45.

<sup>92</sup> Hall, *Well of Loneliness*, 40.

<sup>93</sup> Doan and Prosser, *Palatable Poison*, 78.

<sup>94</sup> Radclyffe Hall, *Your John: The Love Letters of Radclyffe Hall*, ed. Joanne Glasgow (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>95</sup> Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, xv.

and defined her psyche as closer to masculine than feminine.<sup>96</sup> When criticized for her dress, Hall responded that her clothes were an expression of her “inversion,” and that she could not change her style.<sup>97</sup> The refusal to change clothing styles is a sign of her internalization of sexology. A female invert’s identity hinges on her manly clothes. In fact, similar to Sackville-West, Hall also examined aspects of her childhood to find evidence of inversion. She had a portrait of herself as a five year-old child altered, having an artist paint over some of her hair to appear more masculine.<sup>98</sup> Hall’s embodiment of the sexological literature is illustrated in her adoption of masculine haircuts, dress, and nicknames. Additionally, her letters to various lovers show her personification of the masculine “congenital invert” theory. Hall wrote to Evguenia Souline in 1934, “that day in your bedroom...do you remember? I wanted to take you into my arms.”<sup>99</sup> “Obey me,” she ordered Souline, “you say that you find sweetness in obeying me, because you love me...my very, very little, lonely child.”<sup>100</sup> Hall then commented, “I cannot help desiring you, Sweetheart, because I am very terribly in love, because I love your body as a lover.”<sup>101</sup> When Hall told Souline, “I wanted to take you into my arms” and that “I love your body as a lover,” these words would be more likely spoken by a man than a woman. They are sexually aggressive in a way women were not supposed to be. By having Souline “obey” her and calling her a “child,” Hall channeled her masculine identity further. She had access to the writings of Krafft-Ebing and Ellis from a young age, and these theories shaped her as she grew

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<sup>96</sup> Katrina Rolley, “Cutting a Dash: The Dress of Radclyffe Hall and Una Toubridge,” *Feminist Review* 35.1 (1990): 60.

<sup>97</sup> Doan and Prosser, *Palatable Poison*, 80.

<sup>98</sup> Roiphe, *Uncommon Arrangements*, 218.

<sup>99</sup> Hall, *Your John*, 46.

<sup>100</sup> Hall, *Your John*, 47.

<sup>101</sup> Hall, *Your John*, 47.

up to identify as a “congenital invert.” Similar to Sackville-West, Hall fit her partners into the sexological theories as well.

Una Troubridge was the ideal embodiment of the pseudo-invert, and Hall was the perfect example of a congenital invert. In 1915, Hall met and fell in love with Una Troubridge. When Mabel Batten died in 1917, Una and Hall began living together. Troubridge, however, had been married to Vice-Admiral Ernest Troubridge, a famous naval officer, and was the mother of a young daughter. Because of Una’s previous sexual history with men, as well as her propensity to dress in traditionally feminine clothing, Una was framed as the pseudo-invert to Hall’s congenital invert. In a 1927 photo of the pair found in Appendix A, the differences between their gender expressions are clear.<sup>102</sup> Hall stands above Una, illustrating a male/female power dynamic between the two, and Una is lounging on a chaise. Hall’s hair is cut short and her hands are preoccupied: one holds a cigarette (a traditionally masculine pastime) and the other is in her pocket. Her suit is darkly colored and tailored well; she looks assertive and confident, staring into space. Una, on the other hand, reclines on the chaise with her legs tucked underneath her. Her dress is patterned and colorful and she stares at the ground. Hall is clearly the male figure in this photo. Not only are her clothes and hair styled similarly to a man’s, but her stature and pose convey self-assurance associated with masculinity. Una’s position below Hall illustrates submissiveness and demureness, both of which are feminine characteristics. In her article “Cutting a Dash,” Katrina Rolley writes about the male/female dichotomy illustrated by Hall and Troubridge. She argues, “as the two women became more involved with, and convinced of, Ellis’s theories about inversion, their styles of dress became increasingly polarized along

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<sup>102</sup> See Appendix A

‘masculine/feminine’ lines.”<sup>103</sup> Internalizing theories of inversion caused Hall and Troubridge to embody those characteristics. Although Hall and Troubridge were open about their identities as “inverts,” they faced societal resistance towards accepting non-heterosexuals.

When confronted with challenges to her identity, Hall used the sexologists’ pleas for tolerance to defend her relationships. While with Troubridge, Hall began a relationship with a younger woman named Evguenia Souline in 1934. Souline wrote Hall a letter claiming that their attraction to one another was “emotionally wrong” and should not be continued.<sup>104</sup> Hall became distraught and wrote in her response, “I have never felt an impulse towards a man in all my life, this because I am a congenital invert. For me to sleep with a man would be ‘wrong’ because it would be an outrage against nature... Where’s your medical knowledge?”<sup>105</sup> Hall attempted to justify her lesbianism by using sexological theory. She was a “congenital invert” who was attracted to women; therefore, it would be wrong for her to force herself to be with men. Furthermore, by questioning Souline’s “medical knowledge,” it showed the high esteem in which Hall placed the sexologists. Instead of viewing *Psychopathia Sexualis* and *Sexual Inversion* as sexological theories, Hall considered the works of these men to be comparable to the published works of doctors. Hall continued with her letter, writing, “you must not think us perverted... I am in no way perverted my very dearest heart, nor am I in any way a devil and evil.”<sup>106</sup> Her appeals to Souline to accept her also echo the sexology. Ellis advocated for a more tolerant view of homosexual attraction, and Hall attempted to use this to justify her own behavior. Using sexological theory to explain lesbianism “absolved the lesbian, a victim of nature, from the

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<sup>103</sup> Rolley, “Cutting a Dash,” 57.

<sup>104</sup> Hall, *Your John*, 50.

<sup>105</sup> Hall, *Your John*, 50.

<sup>106</sup> Hall, *Your John*, 51.

accusation of perversion.”<sup>107</sup> Not only did Hall use sexology to help create her own physical style and identity, but she also used it as a means to create sympathy for lesbians. In *The Well of Loneliness*, as well as real life, Hall used sexology to absolve women-loving-women.

Hall had Ellis write the introduction to her book. A advocate of tolerance towards sexual inverts, Ellis wrote that *The Well of Loneliness* and Stephen’s portrayal illustrated sexual inversion “in a completely faithful and uncompromising form” and the “poignant situations are set forth with a complete absence of offense.”<sup>108</sup> Ellis’s commentary lent credence to Hall’s assertions that female sexual inverts ought to be treated with more dignity. These appeals for acceptance make the difficulties Stephen faces even more affecting.

Throughout the novel, Stephen connects the obstacles she faces to her sexual identity. One of her first loves, a woman named Angela Crosby, leaves her to marry a man. Stephen is heartbroken. Her maid, Mrs. Puddle, tries to talk with Stephen about Angela, but Stephen refuses to say anything. Puddle, “loathed and despised the conspiracy of silence that forbade her to speak frankly.”<sup>109</sup> Puddle wanted to help Stephen through her feelings but, because Angela and Stephen were women, Puddle was not supposed to discuss their relationship. Later in the story, after Stephen’s father dies, she goes into his study. She comes across Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*, which is enlightening for her, as she can now identify as a sexual invert. While Stephen is in the study, however, she also comes across a Bible open to the page with the lines, “And the Lord set a mark upon Cain....” Stephen breaks down and when Puddle comes to help, Stephen asks her “would you go with Cain whom God marked?”<sup>110</sup> Stephen implied that the Mark of Cain is her sexual inversion. Her frustration with God lasts until the last line of the

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<sup>107</sup> Rolley, “Cutting a Dash,” 64.

<sup>108</sup> Hall, *Well of Loneliness*, 5.

<sup>109</sup> Hall, *Well of Loneliness*, 200.

<sup>110</sup> Hall, *Well of Loneliness*, 260.

book, in which she exclaims, “we have told You we believe...we have not denied You; then rise up and defend us. Acknowledge us, O God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!”<sup>111</sup> Stephen’s sexual inversion is an issue for her throughout *The Well of Loneliness*. She has her heart broken because of it; people leave her or refuse to speak to her; she loses friends over being an invert. Stephen’s treatment is meant to garner sympathy and compassion for her and her “affliction.” Hall internalized sexology to shape how she, as well as her fictional characters, dressed and behaved. But she also took to heart the sexologists’ pleas for tolerance and put them in her own work.

Lesbians internalized the sexological literature, and it dictated their behavior, dress, and literature throughout the 1920s. After reading Krafft-Ebing and Ellis, Vita Sackville-West dressed as a man while with her female lovers, and she scoured childhood memories in an attempt to seem more masculine. Woolf was not as experienced as her partner, and Sackville-West gladly took on the masculine role in terms of sexuality, as well. Sackville-West’s behavior inspired Woolf to write *Orlando*, a story about a character who changes their sex and comes in contact with other partners who are androgynous. Although Woolf wrote about lesbianism, as well as feminism and the questioning of gender norms, she could not do so explicitly because of societal pressure. These were not concerns for Radclyffe Hall, another woman who found inspiration in sexology. She wrote openly about congenital inversion in *The Well of Loneliness*, and echoed sexologists’ beliefs that inverts should be treated with respect rather than contempt. A lesbian herself, Radclyffe Hall’s dress was influenced by sexological “symptoms” of inversion. She embodied the “congenital invert” while her partner, Una Troubridge, formerly married to a man, inhabited the role of the “pseudo-invert.” The sexological literature of the late-

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<sup>111</sup> Hall, *Well of Loneliness*, 521.

Victorian era had a profound effect on lesbians of 1920s Britain. While radical feminist historians decried sexologists, early 20<sup>th</sup>-century lesbians, like Sackville-West and Hall, found acknowledgment, an identity, and an explanation of their “affliction” in the sexological literature. In an era in which fashion experimentation was acceptable, sexologists helped lesbians to identify and live their sexualities, through clothing, behavior, and literature.

### *Conclusion*

My claim that not only was sexology progressive, but actually helped some lesbians create an identity for themselves, challenges the assertions of radical feminist historians. Scholars like Lillian Faderman and Sheila Jeffreys, looking back into history for a “feminist Golden Age,” argue that the eras preceding the publication of sexological literature were a time when women-loving-women love could enjoy uncensored sexual intimacy. In her book *Surpassing the Love of Men*, Lillian Faderman writes, “love between women had been encouraged or tolerated for centuries”<sup>112</sup> and that “women had no reason to fear that their emotion was immoral or diseased, and so they could give expression to a passion that developed very naturally.”<sup>113</sup> While women who loved each other were able to do so without fear of being labeled as abnormal, this intimacy was no longer possible due to men like Ellis and Krafft-Ebing. Despite the burden of patriarchy, radical feminists tend to focus on tolerance for same-sex desire as a litmus test for women’s well being.

Some radical feminist historians argue that benefits lesbians found in the sexological literature, like the ability to construct a new identity, was, in fact, double-edged. Jeffreys acknowledged that the 1920s allowed gender and sexual experimentation, but she advises, “we must remember that the necessity for this form of ‘defense’ was the result of the sexologists’ work in stigmatizing and isolating the lesbian in the first place.”<sup>114</sup> In other words, sexology ruined the “Golden Age” of female same-sex experimentation; the only reason lesbians even

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<sup>112</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1981), 240.

<sup>113</sup> Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 102.

<sup>114</sup> Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, 113.

needed to create an identity in the 1920s was because sexology destroyed the freedom of experimentation they had had before.

Despite Faderman's and Jeffreys' arguments, the medicalization of sexuality during the Victorian Era did have positive repercussions. Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* challenged the criminalization of homosexuality, claiming that same-sex attraction was a mental disorder and people suffering from it ought to be viewed with sympathy. Havelock Ellis echoed this plea for tolerance the following decade in *Sexual Inversion*, in which also argued for sympathy towards those with homosexual "inversion." And Edward Carpenter expanded on these ideas, claiming that people with same-sex attraction were not perverse at all, but simply in the middle of the sexual and gender continuum, with masculine men on one side and feminine women on the other. Although their explanation of the causes of same-sex attraction differed, the sexologists all advocated tolerance. While Krafft-Ebing, Ellis, and Carpenter did have some problematic concepts in their works, like connecting "symptoms" of lesbianism with behaviors of "New Women," they were progressive in their own times. Writing about and medicalizing homosexuality in an era of extreme homophobia was a radical act. Maintaining that women had sex drives and could be attracted to both men and women was progressive, as well.

Women-loving-women were able to create an identity for themselves, defining their behaviors and dress by sexology. The liberalization of the 1920s allowed women to dress in masculine suits and crop their hair with little suspicion of their sexualities. This openness gave women-loving-women, like Vita Sackville-West and Radclyffe Hall, a chance to embody sexological theories. Sackville-West dressed in men's clothing and was called "Julian" while with her female lovers; she wrote in her memoir about all the boyish activities and behaviors she got up to as a child. Hall was nicknamed "John" and also dressed in masculine fashions. Not

only did sexologists help lesbians to recognize their own sexualities, but they also laid groundwork for women-loving-women to create identities for themselves. Overall, I argued that sexology was beneficial to early 20<sup>th</sup>-century lesbians. Jeffreys' and Faderman's arguments gloss over the progressivism found in Victorian Era sexology. They also discount how beneficial it was for lesbians to be recognized as sexual beings. For women like Sackville-West and Hall, the ability of sexological literature to demystify their own gender and sexual identities proved liberating rather than confining.

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Appendix A



<http://spartacus-educational.com/Wradclyffe2.jpg>