

The figure of the mannish lesbian in nineteenth-century sexology essay sample



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In the nineteenth century, the concept of the lesbian as a “figure” surfaced. That is, the term “lesbian” came to signify a certain portion of the population adhering to a regiment of attributes and classifications. Scientists combined the fields of medical, sexual, and psychological study to create sexology. These self-proclaimed “experts” studied lesbians and produced the notion of female homosexuality. It was the combination of the emerging field of sexology and previous thoughts on female-female relationships that created the figure of the “mannish lesbian” in the United States and Europe in the nineteenth century.

While it was not until the nineteenth century that the mannish lesbian emerged as a figure, female same-sex desire was present and appears to have been even somewhat prevalent in U. S. and British culture.

Interestingly, it was neither illegal nor particularly looked down upon. Though not unanimously endorsed, female homosexual relationships, sexual or not, were seen as a phase that many women went through in the process of maturation. As one man said, “we all know the sort of romantic, almost hysterical friendships that are made between young women.”¹

The famous case of Alice Mitchell, a young woman who murdered her female lover in 1892, even began in a socially sanctioned manner. Though Mitchell’s eventual “passing” as a man in order to elope with her lover crossed the line of acceptability, her and Freda Ward’s love was initially perceived as “an ordinary, if excessive, schoolgirls’ romantic friendship-in Memphis, such relations were called ‘chumming’.”² The fact that such non-platonic friendships were given a name suggests both a ubiquity and a tolerance toward them. In fact, the social phenomenon of the “romantic friendship”

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began in the eighteenth century, and a relationship between two women living together was coined as a “ Boston marriage” after a relationship in Henry James’ novel *The Bostonians*. 3

The Emergence of the Mannish Lesbian as a Figure

The figure of the mannish lesbian, then, grew out of the context of passionate female “ friendships” and Boston marriages. She was a new breed, a woman who not only had same-sex relationships but could also be typified in other ways. The concept of same-sex desire in women was now limited to women who looked, dressed, and acted in a specific manner. The defining characteristic of the mannish lesbian was a distinct distaste for and rejection of traditional female gender roles-especially marriage and motherhood-in exchange for an espousal of “ masculine” features. These features applied both to the physical body and to the behaviors and desires of a subject.

Sexologists and researchers conducted dozens of studies of female inverts’ bodies to try to define them as somehow distinguishable from other women. The term “ invert,” in fact, implied something wrong or at least different in these women; it echoed the concept that an inversion of masculinity and femininity had taken place, resulting in a masculine soul wrongly placed in a female body. They examined several physical aspects because they felt that if they could determine what was unusual or “ wrong” with these women, it would be easier to solve the problem or disease of female homosexuality. Sexologists submitted lesbian subjects to countless examinations, ranging from tests to determine if they had ovaries or testicles, extreme scrutiny of

the genitals, and measurements of the clitoris, head, hands, pelvis, and other body parts.

The most prominent physical anomaly that sexologists attributed to lesbians was a particularly enlarged or “ hypertrophic” clitoris. From the late eighteenth-century until the early twentieth century, a hypertrophied clitoris was actually one of the most common descriptions of lesbians. 4 The notion that lesbians had unusually large clitorises was not well supported by data, but rather was only found in a handful of cases. (Heterosexual women were not studied, however, so it is quite possible that an equal percentage of heterosexuals had large clitorises.) But as Margaret Gibson notices, the “ ease with which these few cases became generalizations testifies to the immense cultural predetermination of the link between female homosexuality and clitoral hypertrophy.”

Regardless of the lack of evidence supporting this hypothesis, the idea was pervasive and enticing for two reasons. The enlarged clitoris had an obvious link to maleness in its “ imitation” of a penis and it offered a seemingly unequivocal method to delineate between homosexuals and heterosexuals. The social implication of studying the clitoris is also essential: for a white, homosexual woman to have a hypertrophied clitoris immediately linked her in contemporary logic to prostitutes and non-white women. These two figures were believed to exhibit large clitorises and were considered a step below proper, white society on the evolutionary scale.

Besides the size of the clitoris, lesbians were thought to be physically anomalous and masculine in other ways. Stella Browne, Havelock Ellis, and

especially Richard von Krafft-Ebing, in his series *Psychopathia Sexualis*, record information about numerous female homosexuals, including their physical attributes. Browne, for example, describes one of her cases as “[t]all...broad shoulders, slight bust, narrow hips.... Voice...quite deep,” and another as having a “boyish figure; very strong, hard muscles.”

In an extreme case of “eviration,” as Krafft-Ebing terms his patients’ psychological transformation from woman to man, he documents one patient (case 130) whose “hitherto soft and decidedly feminine features assumed a strongly masculine character,” so that she seemed “a man clad in female garb...her breasts were disappearing, her pelvis was becoming smaller and narrower...and her skin was becoming rougher and harder.”⁷ We might never know how accurate Krafft-Ebing’s portrait of his patient is, but the fact remains that he felt her “masculinization” to be so important that it comprises the majority of her case study.

Non-Physical Attributes of the Mannish Lesbian

According to sexological thought, lesbians were in a different class in terms of behavior and desire as well. A statement about one woman sums up many of the preconceptions about lesbianism: she was “‘a lewd, unchaste and immoral woman’” who “‘was about ‘to give private performances of an obscene and indecent character’, which... were ‘designed as to foster and encourage obscene and unnatural practices among women.’”⁸ Thus this woman was different and threatening in not only her “immoral” behavior but in her potential encouragement of other women to act similarly. Sexologists believed lesbians to be excessive masturbators, aggressive and violent. The

oft-quoted Alice Mitchell case caused fear in the American populace because of its suggestion that lesbians were jealous to the point of violence and even murder. Like men, the mannish lesbian was possessive of her women, but she went a step beyond propriety by letting her possessiveness turn into violence. She was dominating, taking the “ place” of the man in her relationships as well as in sexual activity.

Furthermore, lesbians were conceived of as aggressive and uncouth. They were conniving and adamant enough to seduce proper, heterosexual women into a relationship. Krafft-Ebing’s case 130 illustrates lesbians’ vulgarity by being inclined to “ use curse words and oaths,” 9 a behavior that clearly repulsed the author. The mannish lesbian, then, constituted the antithesis of female propriety: instead of being a dainty, passive, maternal figure, she was a foul-mouthed and violent seductress.

Lesbian desires were construed as very different from heterosexual women’s as well. Besides their obvious desire for other women, sexually or at least in passionate and romantic friendships, lesbians were believed to have other abnormal desires. For one thing, pedophilia was associated with lesbianism: sexologist Albert Moll, for example, claims that lesbians while masturbating “ think of young girls during the act. [...] There seem to be women of homosexual tendencies who desire young immature girls.” 10 The presumption that lesbians were aggressive and predatory in their coveting of girls was pervasive in society. August Forel agreed, claiming to have known lesbians who seduced young women and made them their lovers in a customer and prostitute-like relationship. 11

Lesbians were perhaps most commonly recorded as desiring “boyish” things over more stereotypically “girly” pastimes. One of Browne’s cases, for example, had a “decided turn for carpentry, mechanics, and executive manual work,” 12 jobs that would have been reserved for her male counterparts. Lesbians are also frequently cited as enjoying sports and nature as children rather than dolls and dresses. These boyish cravings were thought to come full-circle upon puberty and adulthood, when sexologists claimed that many had an innate desire to “be a man.” One such case involves a certain “Sarolta, Countess V,” a. k. a. “Count Sandor V,” a woman who dressed as a man (including a bandage around her body which Krafft-Ebing suggests was to hold a priapus) and professed to be male to all her acquaintances. Though she was physically female, Sarolta/Sandor’s desire to be a man was so strong that Krafft-Ebing states she did not even tell her maids of her guise. 13

It is important to note that any women who had same-sex relations without adhering to the rules of their definition posed a problem for sexologists attempting to describe and classify them. Though they surely had patients who did not exhibit “masculine” features, they seem to have been left out of most case histories. What would nowadays be called the “femme,” for example, was absent in the discourse of lesbianism in the nineteenth century. This is, of course, due to the manner in which scientists and psychologists attempted to justify “contrary sexual instinct.” Most of the sexologists conceived of same-sex desire as “inversion,” that is to say, a perverse masculinization of what should have been a purely female body and soul. Ellis briefly mentions non-masculine homosexual women, justifying

their behavior merely by saying 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.” 14 Though he is unable to fully understand their motives for not engaging in heterosexual relationships, Ellis makes it clear that while they are accepting of other women’s advances, they have not made the necessary transition to masculinity to be defined as a lesbian.

Competing Theories of Female Homosexuality’s Causation

It is fascinating to observe not only how sexologists imagined the figure of the mannish lesbian but also how they explained her existence. At a time when heterosexuality was conceived of as the only “ normal” means of sexual expression, all forms of non-heterosexual or non-conjugal love and intimacy were foreign and therefore deemed worthy of study by sexologists. They thought that anyone who had unusual sexual preferences or behaviors must have had something amiss. Sexological documents generally classify lesbians into one of two categories: a “ congenital invert” or an “ acquired invert.” While these two categories were sometimes hazy, sexologists such as Ellis and Krafft-Ebing took careful note to group their patients by their respective “ causes” for inversion.

What the sexologists coined “ congenital inversion” was any physical, physiological, or hereditary reason for homosexuality. Krafft-Ebing, for instance, notes that many of his patients have homosexual siblings or have parents with neurological diseases. He takes great care in *Psychopathia Sexualis* to include any “ relevant” (i. e. unusual) psychological and physical

family history of his patients. Genetic disease or neurasthenia might lead an otherwise normal woman to exhibit latent homosexual tendencies. Many sexologists saw this type of homosexuality as a degeneration, a reversion to the so-called "bisexual past" in which there was little or no differentiation between males and females. Havelock Ellis was more sympathetic than most sexologists, agreeing with his coworkers that homosexuality was congenital yet maintaining that because it was innate in the individual it could not be degenerative. 15

Searches for the "cause" of female homosexuality became so vital in sexologists' minds that some lesbians were even put through testing to determine if they were "truly" male. During the nineteenth century, the "truth" of an individual's sex was dictated by the gonads rather than by genitalia or by his/her opinion. If a lesbian were discovered to possess testicles, her affections for other women could be understood as natural because she was actually male. Though a patient might not have known that she was gonadally male, "French and British colleagues documented a number of cases in which pseudohermaphrodites [anyone neither completely male nor female] had...the sorts of desires predictable for their 'true' sex."

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Sexologist Edward Carpenter offered a slightly different explanation for homosexuality: in what he termed people of the "intermediate sex," there was an inversion of the normal soul-body relationship. Instead, "the female homosexual, underneath her female body, could be characterized by her masculine soul and temperaments." 17 In granting the lesbian a "male"

soul, he accounted for a woman's masculine attitude and sexual desire for other women while still occupying a female body.

Upon failure to identify any innate cause for their patient's homosexuality, sexologists would undoubtedly determine the reason "acquired" sometime in life. These factors ran the gamut from the patient's company to her behavior to the environment she lived in to a single instance of seduction by another lesbian. A common cause that sexologists cited for lesbian behavior was based on the patient's environment. August Forel, for instance, claims that lesbian love takes place "chiefly in brothels or with prostitutes, in barracks, boarding-schools, convents, and other isolated places where [...] women live alone and separated from the other sex." 18 The fear that women might revert to homosexual expressions of love and sexuality saturates sexological writing. This anxiety was fueled by men who were afraid that women could be easily led astray from their love of men and their womanly duties if left alone. Just like the stereotype of heterosexual men reverting to homosexuality due to a lack of women on ships or in jail, women were thought to develop homosexual behaviors in places without men.

Similarly, Margaret Otis writes of a boarding school for girls where the students would form homosexual relationships between one white and one black pupil. Otis suggests that this was not due to any inherent homosexuality in the girls, but rather due to the absence of boys. She even goes so far as to claim that the "difference in color...takes the place of difference in sex." 19 Exclusively women's colleges were another institution accused of fostering lesbianism. For example, Mt. Holyoke, the first women's

college, was established in 1837 and provided a safe space for women to meet each other and form relationships, some lasting for years. 20

Of course, even if a woman were not in a male-less environment, she could develop homosexual behaviors. For one thing, people thought that any unassuming woman could be “ seduced” into a relationship by another lesbian. Masturbation was also believed to incite a desire towards women. Various case studies quote woman who masturbated excessively, began to fantasize about other woman while they masturbated, and consequently develop same-sex desires. Both of these anxieties proliferated as the mannish lesbian became a symbol for excessive and predatory sexuality.

Why Then?: The Social Context of the Mannish Lesbian’s Emergence

The mannish lesbian’s emergence coincided not accidentally with a host of other social phenomena. Feminism, for one, began to circulate as a movement and a social ideal in the late nineteenth century. Life at this time in the United States and Europe was bleak for women. Women were prohibited from holding most jobs and faced difficulty owning property. Of course, it was also illegal for women to vote or even to wear pants. Beyond legality, women confronted a slew of expectations from society: purity, passivity, asexuality, motherhood, marriage, etc. This image of “ proper” womanhood left little room for choice or self-expression. During this period of social oppression, then, any woman who spoke out or acted out against the heteronormative society she lived in caused her peers great suspicion.

But feminist ideals led many women to reject their given role in society.

Women “ wanted not simply male professions but access to the broader
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world of male opportunity. They drank, they smoked, they rejected traditional feminine clothing," 21 etc. The challenge that such independent and free-thinking women posed to men was frightening enough, but anxiety thrived about those women who chose to love other women. The idea of female-female sexual activity both baffled and horrified many heterosexuals. The contradicting stereotypes of the female homosexual as hypersexual and as harmless complicate her persona. As Doan notes, " such matters [female homosexuality] could not be discussed by ' decent' people" 22 because of its inherent grotesqueness. At the same time, however, the preconception that men had a stronger sex drive than women led it to be relatively tolerated; without an active male, it was assumed that limited sexual activity took place between women. 23 As a self-liberated woman, the mannish lesbian frightened heterosexual society because her desire to adopt " masculine" behaviors and increase her options to choose her own partner and livelihood.

The other major social context in which figure of the mannish lesbian emerged is the circulating discourses of racism and degeneracy. In the United States and especially Europe, the eugenics movement took off in the nineteenth century, looking to eradicate all " degenerative" genes. Effectively, " degenerative" came to include any non-heterosexual, non-conformist, or non-white individual. Contemporary logic placed different races and civilizations on an evolutionary " scale," the end of which was upper-class, heterosexual, white society. Thus the mannish lesbians (predominantly white women from the upper and middle classes) came to be linked in the minds of the sexologists with non-white women and other sexual deviants such as prostitutes, onanists, and sadists. The mannish

lesbian and other sexual deviants were singled out as anxiety-producing because of their rejection of heteronormative society and thus their lower evolutionary status.

But what is perhaps more interesting is to observe how the mannish lesbian was associated with non-white (especially black) women. Both of these groups, it was believed, represented primitive cultures, and were linked together in three ways. First, racism and homophobia were comparable because both discriminated against the opposite of the ideal-whiteness and heterosexuality. Furthermore, according to the Darwinian model of evolution, more evolved organisms exhibit more sexual differentiation between males and females. 24 Black women, like lesbians, were believed to be less sexually differentiated than white women, including having a hypertrophied clitoris. One doctor even claimed that, “ in some tribes in Africa, the clitoris is said to hang down like a finger,” 25 just like lesbians’ grotesquely large genitalia. Black women, like lesbians, were further believed to be more physically similar to men than their white counterparts, once again evoking the image of the “ bisexual past.”

The final way that racism affected the discourse of lesbianism was the use of the mixed body (half white, half black) as a way to explain the “ inverted” body. 26 The perverse mixing of races (again representing atavism) was used as a metaphor for the repulsive matching of male and female in the mannish lesbian. For these reasons, within the contexts of sexual normality and eugenics, the mannish lesbian was viewed as a figure defying all propriety and therefore one that should be “ cured” or eliminated from society.

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Lesbian Responses

Given the plethora of negative reactions-fascination, marginalization, medical testing, and claims of degeneracy-that sexologists had toward the mannish lesbian, how did she respond? Interestingly, the reactions lesbians gave were widely varied. While many refused the labels sexologists imposed on them, some lesbians actually embraced such descriptions. One of Krafft-Ebing's case studies, for example, "considered her sexual perversion to be 'unnatural, morbid'." 27 Another case agreed that her homosexual tendency was a vice and so "controlled herself [from homosexuality]...suffering much from her abstinence." 28 And in a third case Krafft-Ebing writes that his colleague's patient welcomed the suggestion to be cured at least to some extent. She must have allowed him to treat her since the colleague allegedly "succeeded at freeing this patient from her homosexual affliction by means of hydropathic and suggestive treatment." 29 Furthermore, the academic quality of sexological writing led some women to have confidence, such as Vita Sackville-West, who turned to research in books when she was attempting to explain her unique sexuality. 30 For these women, sexological work had a promising potential to cure them and let them live like the rest of society.

But it seems that most mannish lesbians disagreed with or were surprised by the stamp of degeneracy that sexologists bestowed on them. One of Ellis' patients, for example, said that she had no idea that "feelings like mine were under the 'ban of society'...or were considered unnatural or depraved." 31 The discovery of Psychopathia Sexualis' treatment of "

inverts" led this woman to protest that homosexuals were no worse a people
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than heterosexuals. Freud similarly found that one girl felt “morally perfectly justified...without any sense of past wrongdoing”³² of her homosexual behavior. Many women further disguised themselves and “passed” as men in attempts to get a job or marry another woman. Besides Alice Mitchell, one such example is that of Mary Anderson, a woman who went by the name Murray Hall and married other women twice.³³ Rather than agree with sexologists that their condition was degenerative and needed curing, many women bravely stood up for themselves and led their lives as they wished.

Conclusion

Female homosexual desire posed some problems for sexologists in the 1800s attempting to explain why a woman might seek a relationship with another woman. In the nineteenth century, the concept emerged in the United States and Europe that women might desire each other sexually, rather than just romantically, culminating in the figure of the mannish lesbian. This figure perplexed sexologists because of the stereotype that women were asexual and that sex only occurred when a man initiated the act and a woman passively received him. The lack of an active male in a female-female relationship caused sexologists to conclude that lesbians must be in some way masculine, be it in their physical appearance, their behaviors, or their desires. The nineteenth-century definition of the word “lesbian,” then, excluded women who preferred sex with other women yet were passive and feminine. On the contrary, it thoroughly puzzled sexologists to think that a woman might enjoy sex passively but not with a man; such women were consequently nearly eliminated from case studies.

The social context of the emergence of the mannish lesbian as well as her response to the label are critical to fully understanding her effect on society. The mannish lesbian's persona was created at a time when discourses of sexual and racial degeneracy ran rampant and the image of ideal femininity was being challenged. To appreciate lesbian history and modern lesbian identity, it is necessary to understand its roots. Though the label "lesbian" in today's society does not evoke the same necessary masculinity and aggressiveness, stereotypes about the "butch" lesbian certainly stem from nineteenth-century sexological thought. Mapping the emergence of the mannish lesbian is merely a beginning to understanding the complexities of lesbian history.