The Female Sexual Invert: a Threat to Sexologists' World View

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Abstract

The female sexual invert was a concerning sexual deviancy of women invented and investigated by the sexologists of the Western world in the late nineteenth century. She was characterized as having masculine behaviours and appearance, as well as her involvement in same-sex relationships. Through an examination of the work of the sexologists, the perceived characteristics, causes, and treatments of the invert will be revealed. More importantly, I will reveal how the female sexual invert is primarily a threat to the gender norms of contemporary middle class women, and the broader historical context within which the sexologists operated.

In the late nineteenth century, sexologists throughout the western world became increasingly concerned with all manners of sexual “deviants,” including an increasing focus on the sexual deviance of women, exemplified by a particularly troublesome deviant—that of the female sexual invert. Masculine behaviours and appearance, as well as involvement in same-sex relationships were characteristics of the female invert. Yet why, when same-sex relationships between women during the nineteenth century were becoming increasingly visible, were these women labeled “inverts,” and why did they cause such a great concern, especially at that moment in history? I will define the sexologists’ view of the characteristics, causes, and treatments of the female sexual invert will be defined, but more importantly, I will illustrate how the sexologists’ concern about the invert represented a crisis over the radically shifting gender norms of contemporary middle class women. I argue that the invert’s homosexuality was less of a concern than her gender transgression. These shifts in gender norms were brought on by and connected to the other major changes happening in western society at the time that will also be explored including industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of the women’s movement.

As mentioned, the female sexual invert was characterized by her “aggressive ‘masculine’ sexual and social behaviours” as well as her masculine appearance, and her engagement in same-sex
Sexologist Havelock Ellis describes female inverts as exhibiting their masculinity through their "brusque, energetic movements, the attitude of the arms, the direct speech, the inflexions of the voice, the masculine straightforwardness," as well as their "capacity for athleticism," and "sometimes incapacity for needlework and other domestic occupations." The idea of the invert as "psychical hermaphroditism" -- a "man's spirit in a woman's body" -- became common metaphor in the language of the sexologists common. In the 1860s, sexologists Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Richard von Krafft-Ebing expressed ideas of the typical invert as a "masculine soul, heaving in the female bosom." In 1869, Karl Westphal was the first to coin the phrase "congenital invert," a phrase that encapsulated the common belief among sexologists that inversion is an in-born condition. So closely tied is appearance to the invert that Krafft-Ebing, in his book *Psychopathia Sexualis*, remarked that an invert "may always be suspected in females wearing their hair short, or who dress in the fashion of men." Thus, these individuals were now medically labeled as socially and physically deviant, and this knowledge spread into public consciousness and stigma.

So why was the term concept of "invert" employed? In the late nineteenth century, the Victorian ideal of a woman as essentially passionless and non-sexual still pervaded. Women were seen as passive recipients of men's sexual advances, and it was inconceivable to dominant social theory that a woman could be the sexual aggressor or that she could be involved with another woman sexually. Therefore, the sexologists theorized, based on these women's masculine appearance and behaviour, that they actually were men on the inside, and thus had sexual desires that they directed toward their opposite, women of feminine appearance and behaviour opposite: feminine women.

In keeping with the Enlightenment's belief in the faith of the scientific method to know the world and solve its problems, these men of science undertook the investigation of the sexual invert by seeking a biological basis for the "illness." Krafft-Ebing believed that the inverts' masculine nature "expressed itself anthropologically, in anomalies of development
of the body," and as a result, the sexologists in their studies examined the size of the genitals, head, and larynx, and observed hair growth, muscle tone, pelvis size and shape, and menstrual flow.9 Throughout Krafft-Ebing's case studies, such evidence is given; he describes a woman as having "large labia majora, narrow vagina, uterus...about the size of a walnut" and a pelvis that was "narrowed" and "of [a] decidedly masculine type."10 When Freud and his theory of homosexuals as sexually immature emerged, the scientific examination of the invert shifted to finding physical proof of immature genitals, which Ellis documents. Ellis acknowledges that shift in biological markers when he references an invert that possesses a large clitoris which, in his opinion, is able to penetrate during sexual intercourse. Whereas previously this evidence would support the theory of inverts as closer to a man in biology than a woman, now Ellis distances himself from that evidence by saying "the older literature contains many similar cases."11 The sexologists also theorized causes and outlined treatments for the invert. Most sexologists agreed that there is a hereditary component, and that congenital inverts often had a family history of nervous disorders, or that they had "evidence of innate moral inferiority as well as biological deficiency."12 Masturbation was regarded by some as contributing to the condition, but not as a cause of it.13 Because of the congenital nature of inversion, treatment seemed to focus on control of the condition rather than eradication. Ellis suggests treating the related neuropathic condition through "mental and physical hygiene" such as tonics and exercise, but cautions against the use of marriage as treatment.14 Krafft-Ebing suggests for treatment the prevention of masturbation in inverts and tries to encourage heterosexual impulses, as well as proscribing the "prohibition of the reproduction of such unfortunates."15 Both Ellis and Krafft-Ebing note some limited success with the use of hypnotic treatment;16 however, Ellis seems surprised that inverts see nothing wrong with themselves and notes; "inverts have no desire to be different from what they are."17

The sexologists have been criticized on aspects of their science. Ellis is criticized for drawing from a small sample size, for "rarely conducting in-depth interviews" with his subjects, and for receiving a lot of his case histories second hand.18 George Chauncey points out how Ulrichs

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10 Krafft-Ebing, 438.
11 Ellis, 258.
12 Miller, 74; Faderman, 247; Krafft-Ebing, 444.
13 Ellis, 276.
14 Ellis, 332; 354.
15 Krafft-Ebing, 443.
16 Ellis, 328; Krafft-Ebing, 450.
17 Ellis, 335.
criticized Westphal and Krafft-Ebing for using subjects from mental institutions or prisons.\textsuperscript{19}

Historians have commented on both the negative and positive impact of the sexologists' work. For most sexologists, the congenital nature of inversion was a cause for pity, and they were generally against criminalization because inverts had no choice in the matter.\textsuperscript{20} Some historians have pointed out however, that through creating a pathology, they were still stigmatizing people for who they were.\textsuperscript{21} There are some positive aspects to come out of the sexologists' work. As an in-born condition, the sexologists were arguing for tolerance, even though inverts were still seen under a negative light.\textsuperscript{22} The argument has been made that those who recognized themselves in the sexologists' descriptions of the invert found comfort in a name and an identity for themselves, however stigmatized that identity, and as well comfort that they were not alone in their experience or desires.\textsuperscript{23} In fact, in later editions of his work on sexual deviance, Krafft-Ebing "gave Psychopathia Sexualis a scientific title, employed technical terms, and inscribed the most exciting parts in Latin."\textsuperscript{24} This was because Krafft-Ebing was concerned too many lay people were reading a book he considered for the scientific community, and he did not want his scientific work to be read for tantalizing purposes, or to put ideas into the heads of young, impressionable minds.\textsuperscript{25}

The sexologists focused on defining female sexual inverts based on their masculine characteristics, and not primarily on whom they were directing their sexual attention to. This is evidence that sexual inversion was not synonymous with homosexuality, and that, in fact, their gender transgression was the real cause for concern.\textsuperscript{26} Another fact that highlights that the sexologists' main cause for concern was the gender transgression of the inverts is the sexologists' dismissal of the inverts' partners, their "wives" as Ellis referred to them, because of their feminine nature.\textsuperscript{27} Martha Vicinus, writing about the feminine partners, comments that "the impossibility of defining her by appearance or behaviour baffled the sexologists."\textsuperscript{28} Similarly, Lisa Lindquist argues that women involved in Boston Marriages avoided criticism "because they never lost their identification as ladies. They were refined, polite, educated, and well dressed. Even though they engaged in work in the public arena, their

\begin{itemize}
  \item Chauncy, 39.
  \item Miller, 70; Ellis, 353; Krafft-Ebing, 446.
  \item Miller, 74; Chauncy, 104.
  \item Miller, 74.
  \item Miller, 74.
  \item Robinson, iv.
  \item Chauncy, 94.
  \item Vicinus, 480.
\end{itemize}
activities conformed with ideas of women's sphere." Ellis described the "wives" as "as a rule, decidedly feminine, with little power of resistance," he called them "almost asexual, simply the recipient (or victim) of active lesbian advances." Historians argue that it was only once the focus turned to criticizing an individual's choice of sexual partner that the feminine partner seen as a transgressor as well.

So why did the sexual invert come under definition and criticism when she did? Many historians argue it is because she represented the shifting gender norms crisis that was happening in society, and that the sexologists, as white, upper-class men, were part of the dominant hegemonic structure, and therefore were some of the people most threatened by the changing gender norms. Industrialization and increasing urban populations translated into many more women living lives free from the close supervision of their parents and therefore, more able to define and realize their preferred sexualities and gender identity. An increased number of women in the work force represented a shift in gender norms, and of women moving out of their "separate sphere" of the Victorian age, which allowed women to become economically independent. Lillian Faderman argues that this ending of economic dependency on men was a real threat to the dominant social structure, because it made it possible for women to choose to live with other women, potentially even as sexual partners.

The reaction to the shift in gender norms parallels sexologists' reactions to those active in the women's movement. Faderman points out how, as early as the 1830's, "women who demanded an education and job opportunities were called 'unsexed' and 'semi-women,'" which highlights the links between inverts and feminists. In both cases their gender transgressions were cause for tension, and were popularly inexplicable, given the dominant models of gender and social roles. Ellis called the rise of the women's movement "wholesome and inevitable" and goes on to warn that "when this doctrine is applied to the sexual sphere it finds certain limitations," which critiques women who have "been taught independence of men and disdain for the old theory" of women in the domestic sphere. In addition, while he does not believe the women's movement can cause inversion he does say "they develop the germs of it" and quotes a belief that "many leaders of the movement...have been inverted." Otto Weininger, an Austrian philosopher and "erstwhile sexologist," thought that feminists were actually half men, and instead

29 Lindquist, 41.
30 Chauncey, 95.
32 Chauncey, 104; Faderman, 238; Duggan, 809; Miller, 82.
33 Faderman, 238.
34 Faderman, 239.
35 Ellis, 262.
36 Ellis, 262.
of desiring equality, desired to be men.\textsuperscript{37} Writing in 1900, William Lee Howard called both inverters and feminists "degenerates."\textsuperscript{38} The linking of inversion, and therefore deviance, with early feminists clearly exposes the reactionary motivation behind at least some of the sexologists' analysis.

The writings on female inverters were not free from issues of race and class. Another reason the invert came under scrutiny when she did was because, although the phenomena of women dressing or behaving masculine had appeared in the past, it was previously something witnessed most in the working classes, and there was greater alarm at the fact that it was now appearing in the middle classes.\textsuperscript{39} Chauncey points out that "a number of doctors who described inversion as a disease when it afflicted their middle-class patients, considered it to be an immoral, willfully chosen mode of behaviour on the part of the poor."\textsuperscript{40} It was also understood that the sexual inverters the sexologists spoke about most often were Caucasian, and Duggan suggests that related stories are probably structured differently when other races are being considered.\textsuperscript{41}

Examining the sexologists' writings on the female invert is important to understand the shifts in gender roles that happened in the Western world at the end of the nineteenth century. The sexologists' grouping of female sexual inverters with the participants in the women's movement supports the argument that in both cases the women's gender transgression was the true cause for concern. Of course, the invert's close relation to homosexuality makes this body of work an important part of lesbian history, and some would argue that the invert is the predecessor to the twentieth century "butch" identity.\textsuperscript{42} At the same time, the female sexual invert can be viewed as a predecessor to modern trans identities. As third wave feminism and the rapidly rising trans movement deconstruct the sex/gender binary, the history of the female sexual invert becomes important in understanding how gender norms and related attitudes have shifted with related historical contexts in the western world. It also offers lessons to the present in how powerful both language and social prescription are.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[37] Miller, 83.
\item[38] Chauncey, 92.
\item[39] Duggan, 798; Lincqust, 37.
\item[40] Chauncey, 100
\item[41] Duggan, 804.
\item[42] Vicinus, 480
\end{footnotes}
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