2001

**Altered States: Envisioning the Masculin Woman**

Laura L. Behling

*Butler University, lbehling@butler.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/aprovosts](https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/aprovosts)

Part of the **English Language and Literature Commons**

**Recommended Citation**


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of the Provost at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work of the Associate Provosts by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.
The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture; George Chauncey Jr.'s "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: The Changing Medical Conceptualization of Female 'Deviance'; Lillian Faderman's Surpassing the Love of Men; and Martha Vicinus's "They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong': The Historical Roots of Modern Lesbian Identity.

3. The influence this mass marketing of ideas had on the American psyche cannot be understated since it was capable of reaching, and indeed did reach, a larger, more widespread audience than any single novel or well-publicized speech, as Ellen Gruber Garvey argues in The Adman in the Parlor.

The re-sexing of their sex, even so far as to make it manly in habit and action, they know to be impossible.

—Horace Bushnell, Woman's Suffrage: The Reform against Nature, 1869

In the December 26, 1925, New Yorker, Robert Benchley, a member of the famed roundtable at the Algonquin Hotel, declared in a short piece called "Sex Is Out" that "there is no such thing as absolute sex." If 60 percent of your cells are masculine, he explained, then you "rate as male." Contrarily, "if 60 percent are feminine, you sit with the girls. All combinations are possible up to 99 and 1, but the 100 percent in either sex is a myth." To bolster the absurdity of such a claim, Benchley concocted a conversation between a fictional Roger, intent on expressing his love through percentages, and Mary, his beloved, even though she is married to Fred. "Ever since that night I met you at the dance, my male percentage has been increasing," Roger confesses to Mary. "I used to register 65 percent. Yesterday in Liggetts I took a test and it was eighty-one." Mary credits Roger's increased masculinity to his heavier overcoat and attributes her rise in seven femininity points to her diet. "I had cut down on my starches," she tells Roger. Her inability (or unwillingness) to "understand what it all means" forces Roger to resort to a mean-spirited strategy—ridicule of Fred's declining masculine percentage (16).

According to Roger, when Fred was examined for life insurance last week,
his masculine cells tallied up to forty-seven and that included his American Legion button." A shocked Mary rejects the possibility of such a finding, but Roger assures her that "figures don't lie." The final blow to Fred's masculinity and Mary's beliefs is Roger's pronouncement that "the best Fred can ever be to you from now on is a sister," reiterating the infallibility of the percentages. As evidence of his masculine love for Mary, Roger breaks into song, singing "You and I Total Up to a Hundred." In it, Roger tells of "Alice who rated a cool sixty-two, / She wore knickers and called me her 'matey'; / Betty, who "on a clear day . . . registered eighty"; and Norma, "who gave seventeen, / As her quota of masculine units" (16). Benchley's humorous suggestion does raise the specter of rapidly changing ideas about the core identity of men and women. Imagine the possibilities he foresees. "Woman" and "man" are not absolutes but exist only as gradations on the same scale—at one end point lies "man" and at the other lies "woman." Although Benchley deliberately satirizes what causes an individual to slide along the scale—we certainly are not to believe that stanches affect identity—the very notion that men and women can be something other than men and women is frighteningly provocative.

To be sure, Benchley's satiric portrait does confuse our contemporary sociological notions of the differences between sex and gender; indeed, it proposes no difference between the two. A majority of feminine traits makes one a male; a majority of feminine characteristics, a female. Benchley's "absolute sex" is really "absolute gender," since in his formulations the combination of biological sex and gender presents only two options: a feminine female and a masculine male. Fred's loss of majority masculinity has, according to Roger, transformed him into Mary's "sister," a term used to describe a biological or social relationship. Moreover, gender identification seems to be determined by appearance. Mary's deflating comment about the heavy overcoat, Fred's American Legion button, and the reference in the song to Alice's knickers all signal that dress is an outward signifier of gender predating late-twentieth-century critics who stress the draglike performance of gender—and can influence the gender-percentage reading. Despite his conflation of sex and gender and his reliance on traditional stereotypes in his role assignments, Benchley's New Yorker piece does clearly signal that sex and gender were not static categories but were remarkably fluid.

Feminist and gender theories in the late twentieth century made sure that the operational definitions of girl and boy and woman and man do not have the same shortcomings as Benchley's use of sex and gender as interchangeable terms. Critical approaches have centered on "gender relations," a category. Jane Flax explains, that is "meant to capture a complex set of social relations, to refer to a changing set of historically variable social processes" (628). Through "gender relations," two types of persons are created—man and woman—and both, according to Flax, are mutually exclusive categories. Simply put, "[O]ne can be only one gender and not the other or both" (628–29). Integral to gender relations is perhaps the more basic binary of biological sex: male and female, also mutually exclusive categories. "One important barrier to our comprehension of gender relations," Flax notes, "has been the difficulty of understanding the relationship between gender and sex" (632). Assigning one and only one particular gender to one and only one particular sex—and the relation of that gender to that sex—is therefore problematic. "We live in a world," Flax concludes, "in which gender is a constituting social relation and in which gender is also a relation of domination. Therefore, both men's and women's understanding of anatomy, biology, embodiedness, sexuality, and reproduction is partially rooted in, reflects, and must justify (or challenge) preexisting gender relations" (637).

Judith Butler concisely suggests that "gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex." "It does not follow," she asserts, "that the construction of 'men' will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that 'women' will interpret only female bodies" (Gender 6); gender is, as Butler makes explicit, an "act" (Gender 146), yet it cannot be "read" without the body to which it is attached ( Bodies 337). This emphasis on the "cultural constructedness of 'gender'" was an important move in feminism. Penelope Deutscher argues, "because it denaturalised stereotypes of masculine and feminine behaviour" (37)—female and male bodies could now be considered either feminine or masculine.

The inability to fasten a particular gender to a particular sex and, even further, to a particular sexuality drastically opens up possible identities. Judith Lorber, in Paradoxes of Gender, suggests these multiplicities:

In Western societies we could say that, on the basis of genitalia, there are five sexes: unambiguously male, unambiguously female, hermaphroditic, transsexual female-to-male, and transsexual male-to-female; on the basis of object choice, there are three sexual orientations: heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual (all with transvestic, sadomasochistic, and fetishistic variations); on the basis of appearance, there are five gender displays: feminine, masculine, ambiguous, cross-dressed as a man, and cross-dressed as a woman (or perhaps only three); on the basis of emotional bonds, there are six types of relationships: intimate friendship, nonerot- ic love (between parents and children, siblings and other kin, and long-time friends), eroticized love, passion, lust, and sexual violence; on the basis of relevant group affiliation, there are ten self-identifications: straight woman, straight
man, lesbian woman, gay man, bisexual woman, bisexual man, transvestite woman, transvestite man, transsexual woman, transsexual man (perhaps fourteen if transvestites and transsexuals additionally identify as lesbian or gay). (59)

This list of possibilities makes clear that the rigid categories Western society traditionally recognizes—heterosexual man, heterosexual woman, gay man, and lesbian—are precisely that, classifications attempting to contain the explosive ambiguity of sex, gender, and sexuality. What, after all, is society to do with a hermaphroditic bisexual who appears feminine and engages in an eroticized love relationship with a transsexual female-to-male who cross-dresses as a woman yet refers to him/herself as a straight man?

It is important to recognize, however, that even this complicated question is built on rigidly defined binaries, a criticism Judith Butler and other theorists level against such constructions. Instead of "working sexuality against ... gender" so that "the conceptual structures and cultural practices that define and produce 'women' and 'men' are dismantled," Colleen Lamos argues (88), such terms as female and male become even more codified. Yet it is not only women and men that become the polarized possibilities. Gender, too, is categorized according to "feminine" and "masculine," and sexuality comes to be labeled "homo sexual" or "heterosexual." In short, homosexuality and heterosexuality seem to be "in the process of becoming normalized" (Lamos 88), a critical assumption contained in both feminist theory and gay and lesbian studies. Classifying female roles into "butch" and "femme" in sociological theory today, posit Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, "re s onates with the idea that masculine and feminine . . . traits transcend time and culture, and are biologically based" (323).

There is, moreover, an implicit consideration to attend to when working with such binaries. Instead of existing separately, these terms—female/male, feminine/masculine, homosexual/heterosexual—work in conjunction with each other. Since females have traditionally been gendered as feminine and males as masculine, the explicit binary in heterosexual couplings is female/male, and the implicit binary is feminine/masculine. That is, heterosexuality has traditionally been defined not only by the different sexes but also by the different genders. Kennedy and Davis suggest, "Gender was so identified with sexuality that it was not choice of a partner of the 'same sex' that indicated homosexuality, but the taking on of the role of the 'opposite sex' in the pursuit of sexual relations with the 'same sex'" (325). This is evident in Benchley's piece. Mary functions as Roger's heterosexual object of affection and becomes even more desirable as her femininity points increase and, just as vitally, as his masculinity quotient increases. That is, the more extreme representative of the feminine and masculine ideals they become, the more ingrained and practiced their heterosexuality.

The two problematic characters in Benchley's sex-gender-sexuality equation are Fred, whose masculinity points have so declined that he has ceased to be a majority masculine, and Alice, whose "cool sixty-two" feminine points signal she is approaching a dangerous amount of masculinity, as her knickers would attest. In terms of sexuality, the results should be obvious. If traditionally gendered "opposites" no longer exist in a heterosexual relationship, heterosexuality is questioned and gives way to the suggestion of homosexuality. Despite marriage to Mary, Fred can now be only her "sister," erasing their heterosexual attraction and implying, perhaps, a metaphorical homosexual object choice. As for Alice, her inability to sustain a relationship with Roger suggests that her interest, since her masculinity and femininity points are dangerously close, is not in the masculine Roger or a heterosexual relationship but in someone else.

As Benchley's piece demonstrates, sexualities—both heterosexuality and homosexuality, or, to use the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century term, sexual inversion—were implicitly and explicitly defined by gender. Female sexual inverts became visible because of their masculinly gendered behavior and appearance. Concretely, gender construction expressed itself in American society in a variety of manners that were both inwardly and outwardly signified. If women exhibited behavior that was thought to compromise their "natural" role as reproductive mothers, their femininity was questioned. Bodily, this manifested itself, as the sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing described in the early twentieth century, as "masculine features, deep voice, manly gait, without beard, small breasts, cropped hair." It suggested, he continued, "the impression of a man in women's clothes" (quoted in Smith-Rosenberg 272). Behaviorally, women who performed men's work and assumed their roles, often in men's clothing, also were not considered feminine. John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman provide anecdotal stories about women who passed as men. "The account of 'Bill,' a Missouri laborer who became secretary of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, typified the successful passing woman, who lived as men did and loved other women: 'She drank . . . she swore, she courted girls, she worked hard as her fellows, she fished and camped, she even chewed tobacco'" (125). If, as the early-twentieth-century physician George Beard claimed, when "sex is perverted . . . men become women and women men, in their tastes, conduct, character, feelings, and behavior" (quoted in D'Emilio and Freedman 226),
then the traditional categories of men and women, masculine and feminine, and heterosexual and homosexual assume a confusion that is only heightened when alternatives to traditional couplings are introduced. In the Progressive and modern eras, when the difference between sex and gender was not as carefully defined as it is now, a seemingly paradoxical figure developed. Labeled a woman because of her female sex, she also was considered masculine because she dared to take on some of the behaviors of men—wearing bloomers, smoking, drinking, and, as this study emphasizes, demanding political enfranchisement. The result was the oxymoronic, at least for the fin de siecle American society, “masculine woman.”

Visually, this sex-gender anomaly is evident in a postcard produced in 1905. The cartoonist H. H. suggests how the masculine woman appears, complete with a verse that details her exterior gender markers:

She is mannish from shoes to her hat, coat, collars, stiff shirt and waist. She’d wear pants in the street To make her complete, But she knows the law won’t stand for that.

In another postcard, Bishop highlights both physical and psychological confusion when a woman assumes “mannish traits.” Far beyond expressing masculinity through appearance only, what Katrina Rolley refers to as “the communication of identity through dress” (54), this “maid” exhibits psychological signifiers as well: the outer garments reflect her inner identity. Such cross-dressing presents “the heroine of misrule,” a designation Susan Gubar assigns to women who sought “to transcend the dualism of sex-role polarities” (479).

Much of American society, however, would not have viewed the “masculine woman” as a transcendent figure. As Esther Newton makes clear, “From the woman’s exterior, her ‘same sex’ became slowly and unevenly incorporated into medicine, popular culture, and gay and lesbian culture” (325). Their research on a working-class community in Buffalo suggests that such a transition was occurring in the 1940s and 1950s (326). Yet earlier in the century, literary and popular rhetoric privileged heterosexuality because of its adherence to the binaries implicit in sex, gender, and sexuality. Conversely, a female homosexual relationship, constructed on the heterosexual model, required the pairing of a masculine woman with a feminine woman.

Two texts written by American women writers early in the twentieth century anticipate the presence of the masculine woman and the construction of a female same-sex relationship. The work of Gertrude Stein and Charlotte Perkins Gilman within the sexological milieu that swirled around them—particularly the notion that gender shaped an individual’s sexuality and that masculinity was an integral part, perhaps even a cause, of female inversion—suggests not simply a relationship between women but a story deliberately complicated by gender that results in a complex sexuality, more commonly expressed in the decades following the appearance of Stein and Gilman.

Bonnie Zimmerman argues that “serious writers” of the 1920s and 1930s “relied upon codes and subterfuge to express lesbian desire, a strategy that protected them from censure.” Employing such strategies as “suppressing pronouns, changing the gender of characters, inventing a cryptic language of sexuality, or hinting obliquely at relationships between women, these writers,” she concludes, “could tell, but not quite tell, lesbian stories” (Safe Sea 16). As evidence, she cites Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway (1925) and Orlando (1928), Gertrude Stein’s “elaborate private code” in such texts as “Lifting Belly” (1915–17) and “A Sonatina Followed by Another” (1921), and texts by Willa Cather, Angelina Ward Grimké, and Amy Lowell (Safe Sea 17). Jan Hokenson concurs, suggesting that Stein’s first novel, Q.E.D. (1903, published posthumously), was rewritten as “Melanchta” in Three Lives (1909). Instead of focusing on the lesbian coming of age, as she does in Q.E.D., Stein, according to Hokenson, carefully transposes this early novel “to heterosexual terms among blacks in New York” in “Melanchta” (63). Terry Castle argues, arguing that “the archetypal lesbian fiction decanonizes, so to speak, the canonical structure of desire itself... It dismantles the real... in a search for the not-yet-real, something unpredicted and unpredictable” (90–91).

Yet the subterfuge proposed by Zimmerman and read by Castle—“tell, but not quite tell”—is prompted by the assumption that writers changed the gender of characters. Flax’s theoretical musings, Zimmerman’s more grounded literary analyses, and Butler’s position of performance, however, fail to explain the complications that necessarily arise when traditional sex and gender pairings, female sex with feminine gender and male sex with masculine gender, are reversed. Zimmerman’s position that characters’ genders have been changed to avoid censorship is unclear if her changed “gender” means changed “sex,” that is, if a woman is fictionally made male to have a relationship with a woman. The knowledgeable reader presumably knows when a “sex change” has
occurred and then reads the male-female relationship as if it were two women. But this strategy necessitates an inordinate intuition and imagination on the part of the reader. A more practical suggestion is that it is not the sex that is changed to present a heterosexual relationship but that the gender is changed and the relationship remains homosexual. That is, these texts portray experiments with gender identity rather than disguised homosexual relationships masked by conventional male and female roles.

Such a formulation, however, is not Stein’s or Gilman’s clever strategy of disguise but ultimately a plot of disenfranchisement. In working through the complexities of sex and gender, these authors offer the masculinely gendered woman as an amenable solution to conventional femininity. But it is not a satisfactory rendition of the masculine woman and her implicit sexual inversion. By presenting the homosexual woman as masculine and establishing her within masculine homosociality, Stein’s and Gilman’s writing of her is only a rewriting of masculine homosocial code and thus female sexual disenfranchisement.

Identity had been a lifelong struggle for Gertrude Stein; her unwillingness to accept her female sex and her reconciliation with her masculine “identity” are manifested most clearly in her relationship with Alice B. Toklas, who served as “wife,” and in her repudiation of the feminist movement. Abandoned at the same time she left medical school, feminism (as expressed in the woman suffrage campaign) represented for Stein a misguided, shortsighted, and naive reform effort. “Had I been bred in the last generation full of hope and unattainable desires,” the narrator of *Fernhurst* explains, echoing Stein’s politics, “I too would have declared that men and women are born equal but being of this generation with the college and professions open to me and able to learn that the other man is really stronger I say I will have none of it” (7-8).

Stein’s assumption of a masculinely gendered identity and her reluctance to embrace the larger feminist cause figure in her writings, particularly her early novel *Fernhurst* (1904, published posthumously). Marianne DeKoven posits that “internal evidence points to a shift in Stein’s feeling toward feminality” during the years she was a medical student at Johns Hopkins, 1900-1903. “Her sexual identity had been a terrible problem for her early in life,” DeKoven notes, and Stein connected “self-hatred, insecurity, fearful dependency, passivity, and inertia, to her female gender” (34). This identity crisis was expressed in her early writings, where, as Catherine Stimpson argues, the prologue of *Fernhurst* marks Stein’s separation of “herself from her sex in order to assail and herself enter a male world too strong for most women” (187).

Gertrude Stein’s *Fernhurst* has received scant attention, often dismissed by critics as an early, unsophisticated display of themes and styles far more deftly handled in later works. Yet this short novel deserves critical attention precisely because it anticipates attitudes toward feminality and sexual identity that Stein explores in the complex relationships of her later works, such as *Three Lives* or *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,* *Fernhurst,* which later incorporated into *The Making of Americans,* recounts the story of three academics caught up in a romantic triangle. But instead of two men vying for the affection of a woman, one man and one woman seek to win the favors of Miss Bruce, thereby distorting the traditional triangle of heterosexual desire and homosociality. According to Leon Katz’s introduction to *Fernhurst,* the novel is the loosely veiled fictional account of the historical events at Bryn Mawr College involving Alfred Hodder, a promising young philosophy professor; Mary Gwinn, a professor of English; and Dean Martha Carey Thomas, known as a brilliant lecturer who “set the tone of Bryn Mawr’s intellectual life” (xxxiii). Hodder taught with Gwinn for six years until, in 1898, he was forced to leave after their affair became too much for the dean and institution to bear.

In Stein’s novels, as Janice L. Doane notes, “rarely” are there “any male characters. But this does not mean that male positions are not represented.” Rather, they “reveal all the ways women have of speaking and not speaking in a literary framework and culture that privilege the male voice and position” (Doane xxi), as the fictional Dean Helen Thornton, who assumes a masculine position in the novel, demonstrates. Yet Stein’s insistence on a masculinely gendered woman in *Fernhurst* entering into a relationship with a femininely gendered woman, particularly in the early years of the twentieth century when the woman suffrage movement was gaining momentum, provides a unique disenfranchisement of the masculine woman. By configuring the female-female relationships in the gendered formation of feminine and masculine, she establishes a competition of two masculine characters for one feminine object, thereby grounding her work in the gendered structure of heterosexual society.

“There is a dean,” the reader is told, “presiding over the college of Fernhurst in the state of New Jersey who . . . believes totally in this essential sameness of sex.” This dean, the narrator continues, “is possessed of a strong purpose and vast energy . . . is hard headed, practical, unmoral in the sense that all values give place to expediency and she has a pure enthusiasm for the emancipation of women and a sensitive and mystic feeling for beauty and letters” (5). Yet, in accordance with “the male ideal,” this woman’s college is governed by the students, who are “wholly centered in the dean who dominated by a passion for absolute power administers an admirable system of espionage and influence. . . . Honorably and manly are the ostensible ideals that govern the place” (5-...
6. This description identifies the dean's masculine gender; indeed, Thornton's views of higher education for women and her aggressive business personality suggest the masculine ideal, as does her relationship with the "detached" and "transfigured" Miss Bruce.

As head of the English department, her reputation guaranteed by an article on the philosophy of English poetry, Miss Bruce "ideally fulfilled these demands of the dean: that she would be permanent—who would have great parts and a scholarly mind and would have no influence to trouble hers" (18). Bruce came to Fernhurst "utterly unattached" because both of her parents had died just before she entered college. The contrast with Thornton's pedigree is striking, particularly since Thornton is one of "three remarkable women in three generations" (15-16). The matriarchy identifies the homosocial as well as familial bond between women; it also clearly defines her role in the romantic relationship. "It was impossible," the narrator recounts, "for her to be in relation with anything or anyone without controlling to the minutest detail" (47). The powerful and masculine matriarch of Fernhurst, who is in a suggestively intimate relationship with the quiet and feminine Miss Bruce, thus becomes the person against whom Philip Redfern, the newly hired philosophy professor, must compete.

As the novel approaches its confrontational conclusion, the competition does not disintegrate, even when the homosexual result becomes apparent. Redfern leaves at the end of the term; Miss Bruce returns to the confines of her relationship with Dean Thornton; and, after a period of time, "Fernhurst," the narrator relates, "was itself again and the two very interesting personalities in the place were the dean Miss Thornton with her friend Miss Bruce in their very same place" (49). Stein's portrayal of this erotic coupling thus invites a differently constructed eroticism—Bruce is both heterosexual object choice and homosexual object choice—but does not allow that difference to dominate. This portrayal also deviates from the historical conclusion of the college scandal. Alfred Hodder and Mary Gwinn eventually do marry, solidifying the heterosexual paradigm. Stein, writing Dean Thornton as a masculine woman involved in a relationship with the feminine Miss Bruce, allows for a homosexual relationship, but it is figured by the masculinized gender of one of its participants.

Less than a decade later, Charlotte Perkins Gilman took Stein's reformulation one step further by not only portraying a female couple but, even more socially frightening, allowing this couple parenthood. As she does in so much of her other fiction, Gilman provides alternatives to the status quo in order to challenge it and, in many cases, to illuminate the absurdity of social mores. Her 1911 story "Turned" is, as the narrator bluntly explains, about "two women and a man. One woman was a wife: loving, trusting, affectionate. One was a ser vant: loving, trusting, affectionate—a young girl, an exile, a dependent; grateful for any kindness; untrained, uneducated, childish" (93). It is one of the many stories about marriage Gilman wrote to explore the inequalities between men and women. "The women have unequal status," writes Barbara A. White, "and the aggressor in the relationship is the one who plans, thinks, and earns the money—the teacher, the lawyer, the inheritor, the scientist. The characters in the 'female passive spaces'—wife, maid, and secretary—are recipients of the 'male gaze and exhibit stereotypically female qualities" (quoted in Knight 205).

In "Turned," however, the "aggressor," although initially the husband, is in the end the wife, who is a college professor. The maid is certainly the "recipient of the 'male gaze'"—she is, after all, impregnated by the husband. By the end of Gilman's text, however, the husband's role has been usurped by his wife. Terry Castle theorizes that "it is the very failure of the heroine's marriage or heterosexual love affair that functions as the pretext for her conversion to homosexual desire" (83-86). Although there is no indication in "Turned" that Gilman is looking with horror upon the same-sex coupling—she actually turns it to the women's advantage and uses the outcome to express her disgust over the husband's "offense against womanhood"—this version of an altered gender construction would have been considered horrific and monstrous and would have embodied exactly what conservative social commentators, such as Horace Bushnell, who was anxious about "re-sexing," feared.

The descriptions of Mrs. Marroner and her servant, Gerta, establish that these two characters, no matter what socioeconomic differences separate them, are united by a bond stronger than money or social status, namely, womanhood. It also is clear that given their woman-affirming resolution of the tragic events that befall them, this bond cannot be broken by a man—husband or lover—but is as strong if not stronger than marriage. When the story opens, Mrs. Marroner and Gerta both lie sobbing on their beds—Mrs. Marroner in a "soft-carpeted, thick-curtained, richly furnished chamber" and Gerta in her "uncarpeted, thin-curtained, poorly furnished chamber on the top floor" (87)—because they have both received devastating news. Mrs. Marroner has just discovered her husband has impregnated Gerta, and Gerta has just been banished from the house because of her condition.

What precipitates this turn of events is Mr. Marroner's business trip that extends to longer than seven months, enough time for Gerta to begin showing the unmistakable signs of pregnancy. Unable to spirit her away before Mrs. Marroner suspects, Mr. Marroner sends an unsigned, type-written note to
Gerta promising to take care of her when he returns and a fifty-dollar bill in hopes that it will help in the meantime. Unfortunately, he mixes up the letters and envelopes and sends Gerta's letter to his wife and his wife's letter to Gerta. Once Mrs. Marroner overcomes her incredulity at the turn of events and figures out her husband's role in Gerta's pregnancy, she fires the poor servant.

Until this point in the story, there is nothing atypical about Mrs. Marroner's reactions, and although Greta's pregnancy is certainly tragic for her, it, too, even in 1911, is not an unheard of event. However, Gilman's placement of blame and final pronouncement on how to solve such a problem rely, as did Stein's *Fernhurst*, on an alternative sex-gender arrangement between women. Eventually, Mrs. Marroner takes pity on Greta and allows her to stay. White argues that a "strong erotic current pulses throughout" and that this is why what White calls a "woman-rescues-woman" story needs to be "read as a lesbian text" (quoted in Knight 201). Over the course of the story, and becoming more prominent as the plot progresses, is the suggestion that Mrs. Marroner, despite her marital status, is not a femininely gendered woman but instead assumes and increasingly expresses masculine characteristics, while Gerta becomes more dependent on her.

Economic relationships notwithstanding, the coupling of Mrs. Marroner and Gerta slowly begins to rival initially the relationship between a parent and a child but eventually a relationship between husband and wife, man and woman. The narrator offhandedly reveals that Mrs. Marroner has a Ph.D. and prior to her marriage held a faculty position at a college and that her taking care of the simpleminded Gerta "was like baby-tending." Moreover, the longer Mr. Marroner stays away on business, the better Mrs. Marroner is able to run the household, a feat he compliments in his letters. "If I should be eliminated from your scheme of things, by any of those 'acts of God' mentioned on the tickets," he writes her with an irony of which he would only too soon become painfully aware, "I do not feel that you would be an utter wreck. ... Your life is so rich and wide that not one loss, even a great one, would wholly cripple you" (89).

Perhaps this is the germ of thought planted in Mrs. Marroner's mind that was needed to jar her out of her comfortable married, heterosexual, and submissive life, so that when confronted with her husband's unspeakable act, she is empowered. The longer Mrs. Marroner thinks about the event that has just turned her life upside down, the more impassioned anger she directs at her husband. "All that splendid, clean young beauty, the hope of a happy life, with his own pleasure he had chosen to rob her of her life's best joys" (94). Not coincidentally, she comes to these thoughts as she reminisces over the "training of the twenty-eight years which had elapsed before her marriage; the life at college, both as student and teacher; the independent growth which she had made" (92).

Instead of blaming Gerta for the indiscretion, Mrs. Marroner squares places blame on her husband, rejecting the socioeconomic and legal allegiance of husband and wife and instead falling to a more profound alliance, womanhood. "This is a sin of man against woman," she decides. "The offense is against womanhood. Against motherhood. Against—the child" (94). To counter the crime against womanhood and rid herself of the criminal man, Mrs. Marroner abandons the heterosexual homestead and moves, with Gerta and her child, to a college, where she resumes teaching. White, summarizing the outcome, says that "two women are 'turned' from heterosexuality by the behavior of a man" (quoted in Knight 202). When Mr. Marroner finally tracks his wife down, he is greeted by "Miss Wheeling," his wife who is now using her maiden name; Gerta, her "blue, adoring eyes fixed on her friend—not upon him"; and the baby. Instead of offering forgiveness, as Mr. Marroner expects, his "ex-wife" only quietly questions, "What have you to say to us?" (97).

Gilman's subscription to the adage that "turn about is fair play" is clearly evident in this remarkable story where the bonds of womanhood run deeper and stronger than those between a husband and wife. Certainly, Gilman's radical political idea that the man is complicit in unwanted pregnancies, particularly when unfairly using economic leverage, allows a feminist reading that invokes moral certitude. His crime is, according to the heroic Mrs. Marroner, "the sin of man against woman." Moreover, "Miss Wheeling's" willing entrance into a same-sex relationship can be surmised to be a "euphoric" lesbian counterplotting, as Terry Castle describes such "utopic" scenes. "A new world is imagined," she writes, "in which male bonding has no place" (86).

With the genderings of the women and the signifiers attached to them, however, the story is more complicated than it initially appears. Gerta, the docile, obedient, childlike "victim" of "proud young womanhood," presents a stark contrast to Mrs. Marroner, who, with every passing week of her husband's absence, becomes less her married, feminine self and more a woman who has taken on the accouterments of masculinity. Her doctorate, her successful career before marriage, her late marriage at the age of twenty-eight, and her childlessness all contrast her to the clearly feminine and fecund Gerta. The "fault" of the Marroners' childlessness clearly rests with Mrs. Marroner, since her husband has proven his fertility. When at the end Mrs. Marroner decides to become "Miss Wheeling," return to her former life, and take Gerta and child...
along with her, she has effectively usurped the masculine role. She is now the economic support for the "family" and is the object of affection for the "blue, adoring eyes" of Gerta.

Mrs. Marroner's victory over the patriarchal oppression of women too poor or too docile to fight back must necessarily, then, be suspect, since her victory comes at the expense of her femininity. The argument that Gilman is challenging sex and gender roles rings hollow because she so stereotypically characterizes Gerta. What initially seems like a triumph for womanhood is actually a re-writing of the sex and gender roles that adheres to the heterosexual paradigm.

In terms of gender and sex, the resolutions of Fernhurst and "Turned" are remarkably similar. The sexual relationship is established, eventually, between a masculine subject and a feminine object. Although traditional sex-gender alignments are not affirmed, traditional gender expectations are maintained, and the result is the expected and accepted coupling of masculine and feminine. This reaffirmation of masculinity allows the traditional coupling of a masculine subject and feminine object. The reliance on the masculine woman to right the wrong that has been committed against a feminine woman only reaffirms the power of masculinity. It does seem troubling that both Stein and Gilman, long heralded for their subversive constructions of womanhood, could not envision a female same-sex relationship that did not adhere to the heterosexual paradigm. Just how progressive were their portraits if, to show atrocity and to right the wrong that has been committed against a feminine woman only reaffirms the power of masculinity.

Such prominent sexologists as Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing thought women who engaged in same-sex intimacies that were tied directly to their gender were "sexually perverted" (Smith-Rosenberg 283). If a woman was masculine, then her sexual object also was masculine; hence, her libido was directed at a woman. This "unnatural gender ape-ing..." in the words of the sexologists, was a condemnation from which, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg asserts, they could not recover (283).

The threat of sexual inverts permeated society, even something as mundane as life insurance. Dr. William Lee Howard, addressing the American Association of Medical Examiners in 1906, warned that male "inverts" present special risks to corporations providing life insurance. Since the male invert's "whole psychic life" is "feminine, muscular exercise is repugnant to them, hence at about forty years of age we find them with fat, flabby bodies." As if this were not trouble enough, the invert "who does not meet with violent assaults or succumb to alcohol and other drugs develops some organic disease." As a result of the male invert's life, which Howard concludes is a "moral hazard," examiners should understand the "increased liability" and "appraise its value in his estimation of the risk." The female invert, however, presents no such increased risk, according to Howard, since "mentally and psychically we have a man with all the powerful desires of a man." Despite her female anatomy and sociality, her "masculine tendencies" insulate her from "personal assaults, and the alcohol she drinks seems to have a better physiological absorbing surface." Thus, unlike the femininely gendered male invert, the masculinely gendered female invert is, according to Howard, "a good risk" for life insurance ("Sexual Pervert" 207).

Howard's assessment, supported by his claim that he had "a large number of these unfortunate and misunderstood persons under personal care" ("Sexual Pervert" 206), is striking for its reliance on gender rather than sex as the predictor of human behavior. The feminine, not the female, is weak; the masculine tends to make the female invert immune from high risk behavior; but
the anatomical male is powerless once feminized. Yet Howard's delicate separation of sex from gender is not the mark of precocious, theoretically novel thinking. He clearly uses sex and gender interchangeably: oxymoronically, the female invert, affected by her masculinity, is a "man." Howard does not, however, ascribe the same opposite physicality to the male invert, who remains biologically male, although compromised by femininity, and is never called a "woman." Such a careful distinction signals, in addition to an underlying fear of male homosexuality and emasculation, a scientific willingness to understand masculinity as solely the domain of the "man," even if exhibited by an "invert" woman.

Another postcard published from 1908 to 1920 illustrates the final shift from physical to psychological to sexual and leaves no room for such ambivalence about a woman's masculinity and her sexual inversion. "Ps-s-s-t Nix Lady Nix! You're Not My Kind of Valentine," the caption declares about the short-haired, slim-hipped figure. Lacking the accoutrements of femininity, this masculine female invert, affected by her masculinity, is a "man." Howard does not, therefore (240). Faderman posits that "it took the phenomenal growth of female invert in both the popular press and fiction. It is clear that such women did not enjoy a "last breath of innocence," as Faderman phrases it (297), prior to the 1920s. Nor did she enjoy a reprieve after ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment since her status as an enfranchised woman also made her subject to a backlash against independent women in the 1920s and early 1930s.

Relying on three autobiographical novels that fictionally chart the change in attitude toward female-to-female relationships—Canadian American Mary MacLane's Story of Mary MacLane (1902) and I, Mary MacLane (1917) and Wanda Franzen Neff's We Sing Diana (1928)—Faderman contends a lesbian possibility existed before World War I, yet after World War I, specifically in 1920, "the atmosphere is entirely different," and "naïveté was no longer possible." By comparing MacLane's two autobiographical novels, Faderman determines that the "naïveté" of the narrator in the 1902 novel—"Are there many things in this cool-hearted world so utterly exquisite as the pure love of one woman for another"—was not possible in the 1917 sequel. According to Faderman, MacLane's reference to the love between women as "contraband" and "twisted," as well as her pronouncement that the "predilections" of lesbians "are warped," is evidence enough that monumental changes had occurred in the fifteen years between publications (Surpassing 300). Similarly, Faderman argues, when Neff's heroine was a student at a fictional women's college in 1913, "everyone engaged in romantic friendships, which was considered 'the great human experience'" (298–99). But by 1920, when that heroine returns to the same college to teach, "the atmosphere is entirely different. Now undergraduates are portrayed as full of Freudian vocabulary. . . . And intimacies between two girls were watched with keen, distrustful eyes" (299). By reading these novels as chronicles of the turning point in fictionalized women's same-sex relationships, from a pre-1920s "innocence" to a post-1920s "aberrance," Faderman linking of suffragism with masculine womanhood and homosexual expression. If critics move beyond the early stages in which some lesbian historians have seemed, in Vicinus's words, "more concerned with finding heroines than with uncovering the often fragmentary and contradictory evidence which must make up the lesbian past" (435), the woman suffrage movement and its effects on sex and gender categories must join the list of cultural influences. The nineteenth-century social commentator Horace Bushnell, suggesting that the woman suffrage movement was a "reform against nature," declared that the political agitators were undergoing a "re-sexing of their sex, even so far as to make it manly in habit and action" (89). The rhetoric used during the woman suffrage campaign and the language that characterized the independent woman vitally influenced the characterizations of the masculine woman and female invert in both the popular press and fiction.
concludes that prior to 1920 “it was not yet socially threatening if occasional independent women—those who, for example, could eke out a living as artists—chose to devote themselves to each other” (305).

Yet analysis of both the literature and popular press from the late nineteenth century to the early 1930s reveals that these allegedly “innocent” portrayals of sexually inverted masculine women were not nearly so naive as critics have postulated. According to Elizabeth Benson, a Barnard College student writing in Vanity Fair in 1917, a variety of forces contributed to the formation of the “outrageous” younger generation that was “riding high” the “wave of freedom.” “The Nineteenth Amendment was passed while the present younger generation was just entering adolescence,” she claims, “we cut our second teeth on ‘Women’s Rights’ . . . and ‘Birth control.’ ” Margaret Sanger was one of our first memories. ‘Sex,’ which had been a word to whisper and blush at, was flung at us on banners carried by our crusading mothers” (68). Moreover, although World War I allowed and even required women to enter professional occupations in huge numbers and Freud’s theories gained prominence during this same time, these changes cannot explain the derision and dismissal of masculine women and female sexual invert during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Clearly, the perceptions about the woman suffragists stripped the innocence from woman-to-woman relationships and exacerbated the threat such masculine independence and same-sex intimacy manifested.

Literature and the popular press, in essays, fiction, and illustrations, admitted the existence of a masculine woman or her “most aggravated” type, the female invert. Independent women clearly espoused similar rhetoric and behavior that anti-suffragists claimed the suffragists expressed. These independent women, moreover, assumed the accouterments of masculinity, either in determining sexuality. They also preferred wearing jewelry, dresses, and makeup. At the other end of the scale was hypofeminine Jane, who was undecided about what to major in but did enjoy motorcycle riding in jeans, a leather jacket, and no makeup. The study concluded that “low homophobia among heterosexuals is related to the degree to which heterosexuals believe that homosexuals are conventional persons, at least in outward appearance” (352). I cite this study not for its direct bearing on the subject of the early-twentieth-century masculinized woman but for its confirmation of the persistence of gender in determining sexuality.

Esther Newton cautions against causality, suggesting instead that lesbians actively created a masculine identity so that they could better express their sexuality. Whether social constructions were dictated by such women is not as vital to this study as the confirmation that a homosexual relationship was perceived to be possible only if it contained a masculine-feminine pair. A masculine woman necessarily suggested sexual inversion, whereas a same-sex relationship between women often included a masculinely gendered woman.

In Bonnie Zimmerman’s discussion, it is unclear whether she is employing sex and gender as interchangeable terms. Are, for example, authors changing one of their women characters into a male, or are they making her a masculine woman? In the literature I discuss throughout this study, I argue that gender has been changed but that sex remains the same. Given Zimmerman’s citing of Orlando in particular, it appears that “changing the gender” could refer to both biological sex and culturally imposed gender. As a contrast, Zimmerman applauds the “unambiguous inscriptions of lesbian sexuality and identity” by Renee Vivien (Safe Sea 6).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, interested in generally portraying how the rights of women had been stripped, was active in a more particular cause, women suffrage. In pressing the heretofore masculine characteristic of political disenfranchisement became the menace of the era whose insistence on voting rights became the catalyst for social and literary disenfranchisement.

Notes
1. See Lorber for a thorough discussion of sociological studies about sex, gender, and sexuality and how all three complicatedly fit (or do not fit) together.
2. Gayle Rubin, in her essay “Of Catamites and Kings: Reflections on Butch, Gender, and Boundaries,” attempts a similar complication by suggesting the difficulty in defining such terms as butch and femme and the freedom that ensues when such rigid classifications are loosened.
3. In a 1980 study that attempted to quantify homophobia, Mary Riege Laner and Roy H. Laner asked college students to respond to “Jane” according to three different gender types: hyperfeminine, feminine, and hypofeminine. The hyperfeminine Jane was described as a fashion design major whose primary pastime was gourmet cooking; she also preferred wearing jewelry, dresses, and makeup. At the other end of the scale was hypofeminine Jane, who was undecided about what to major in but did enjoy motorcycle riding in jeans, a leather jacket, and no makeup. The study concluded that “low homophobia among heterosexuals is related to the degree to which heterosexuals believe that homosexuals are conventional persons, at least in outward appearance” (352). I cite this study not for its direct bearing on the subject of the early-twentieth-century masculinized woman but for its confirmation of the persistence of gender in determining sexuality.

2. Gayle Rubin, in her essay “Of Catamites and Kings: Reflections on Butch, Gender, and Boundaries,” attempts a similar complication by suggesting the difficulty in defining such terms as butch and femme and the freedom that ensues when such rigid classifications are loosened.

3. In a 1980 study that attempted to quantify homophobia, Mary Riege Laner and Roy H. Laner asked college students to respond to “Jane” according to three different gender types: hyperfeminine, feminine, and hypofeminine. The hyperfeminine Jane was described as a fashion design major whose primary pastime was gourmet cooking; she also preferred wearing jewelry, dresses, and makeup. At the other end of the scale was hypofeminine Jane, who was undecided about what to major in but did enjoy motorcycle riding in jeans, a leather jacket, and no makeup. The study concluded that “low homophobia among heterosexuals is related to the degree to which heterosexuals believe that homosexuals are conventional persons, at least in outward appearance” (352). I cite this study not for its direct bearing on the subject of the early-twentieth-century masculinized woman but for its confirmation of the persistence of gender in determining sexuality.

4. Esther Newton cautions against causality, suggesting instead that lesbians actively created a masculine identity so that they could better express their sexuality. Whether social constructions were dictated by such women is not as vital to this study as the confirmation that a homosexual relationship was perceived to be possible only if it contained a masculine-feminine pair. A masculine woman necessarily suggested sexual inversion, whereas a same-sex relationship between women often included a masculinely gendered woman.

5. In Bonnie Zimmerman’s discussion, it is unclear whether she is employing sex and gender as interchangeable terms. Are, for example, authors changing one of their women characters into a male, or are they making her a masculine woman? In the literature I discuss throughout this study, I argue that gender has been changed but that sex remains the same. Given Zimmerman’s citing of Orlando in particular, it appears that “changing the gender” could refer to both biological sex and culturally imposed gender. As a contrast, Zimmerman applauds the “unambiguous inscriptions of lesbian sexuality and identity” by Renee Vivien (Safe Sea 6).

6. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, interested in generally portraying how the rights of women had been stripped, was active in a more particular cause, women suffrage. In
January 1896, she addressed the Twenty-eighth Annual Women’s Suffrage Convention in Washington, D.C., and the House Judiciary Committee on the subject of “The Ballot as an Improver of Motherhood” (Scharnhorst 45).

7. According to Bonnie Zimmerman, Foster’s 1956 classic “surveys dozens of other novels, plays, and stories by male and heterosexual female writers that depict lesbians at length or in passing. Most of these, however, were strongly laced with the homophobic stereotypes of predatory, masculine, infantile, or hopelessly unhappy lesbians that were the legacy of early twentieth-century writing” (Safe Sea 8).

8. Martha Vicinus remarks that “lesbian history is still in its initial stages, inhibited not only by the ‘suspect nature of the subject’ but also by a lack of scholars willing or able to pursue ‘half-forgotten, half-destroyed, or half-neglected sources’ (433). Even history as recent as the early twentieth century is often ignored for the more easily accessible culture after the 1950s, when lesbian literature experienced a publishing explosion.

Unsightly Evidence

“Female Inversion” and the U.S. Woman Suffrage Movement

Yours it is to determine whether the beautiful order of society... shall continue as it has been [or] whether society shall break up and become a chaos of disjoined and unsightly elements.

—The Reverend Jonathan Stearns, “Female Influence and the True Christian Mode of its Exercise,” 1857

In an early-twentieth-century cartoon by H. C. Greening that brazenly announced its politics in its title, “Giving the Freaks a Treat,” a dime museum manager shouts to his charges “tuh hustle out an’ blow deresez tuh a look!” (see figure 1). From the placards posted around the entrance boasting of the freakish “Octopus Man” and the “Pigheaded Boy,” it would seem the carnival barker should be shouting to the passersby on the street, enticing them with promises of the “Human Toad” and other freaks of human and animal nature. Instead, the museum manager calls to his “freaks” to come outside and see creatures more freakish than they, suffragists, holding placards of their own that declare “Votes for Women” and “We Demand Our Rights”—sentiments and possibilities even more outrageous than the “Octopus Man” with four legs and four arms. The suffrage procession causes the inversion of the normal order of events—the freak show exhibits are called to look at the people on the street rather than the people enticed to look at the museum’s living collections. Greening’s cartoon clearly asserted that women advocating their enfranchisement were organic