

Homosexuality in Perspective: The Discourse

Sexual acts between members of the same sex constitute a phenomenon that has existed and has often been denounced throughout the ages and in many cultures around the globe. Isolating these acts and labeling them, describing and eventually diagnosing them as pathological, is an element of the social organization of Western capitalist societies,¹ which, in turn, has its historical roots in Judeo-Christian morality. Sexual acts between members of the same sex are referred to as "homosexual behavior."

Homosexual behavior has been recorded throughout historical time. Whether condemned (the Sumerians, the ancient Hebrews, the Zoroastrians) or accepted (the Greeks in certain contexts; the Romans, although not officially condoned), this type of behavior was a social fact that had to be taken into consideration in those cultures that presumably influenced Western capitalist societies.²

With regard to the subject of sexuality in general, historians consider institutionalized religious morality fundamental to any discussion dealing with the foundations of Western social organization. The ancient Hebrews, as founders of Judaism, designated exact prohibitions and regulated sexual behavior to conform to a set of rules encoded in the biblical scriptures. Basically, "Judaism placed a negative value on sexual behavior outside the marital bed and considered the primary purpose of sex to be procreation, best exemplified in the Biblical injunction, 'Be fruitful and multiply.'"³ Male homosexual behavior was reprov^{ed},⁴ as was any action that would precipitate male seminal emissions (outside of sexual procreative acts), such as masturbation, bestiality, and anal intercourse. Even coitus interruptus was forbidden because the procreative potential was wasted.⁵ The Judaic admonitions did not include women. Judith Plaskow explains that, whereas male homosexuality was

condemned as an abomination, Talmudic references to it are few and “indicate no knowledge of homosexual orientation in the modern sense.” However, she adds, “Lesbianism, because it involves no intercourse and no ‘wasting of seed,’ was a less serious offence.”⁶ Vern Bullough observes that the ancient Hebrews, “with their male-oriented view of sexuality and penetration, . . . assumed that women could do little among themselves.”⁷ It was not until the New Testament scriptures that women were mentioned. St. Paul’s very ambiguous verse in Romans 1:26 decries the heathens’ lack of belief in the Creator and says that “for this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use unto that which is against nature.” Given Paul’s misogyny, Bullough, for one, speculates that this passage may simply have referred to women assuming the superior position in heterosexual intercourse.⁸ There is no doubt that both the Old and the New Testaments condemn male homosexuality, whereas females are neglected except in the above-mentioned statement.

It is mostly true that male homosexuals were regularly singled out for persecution much more than their female counterparts. Writing in 1955, Derrick Sherwin Bailey, author of a standard study in early antihomosexual legislation, is cited by Louis Crompton as asserting that lesbian acts were disregarded by both medieval and modern law.⁹ Over two decades later, in 1977, Hanley, Schlesinger, and Steinberg present a viewpoint similar to Bailey’s: “Female homosexuality has . . . been met with more acceptance or less condemnation in the past and at the present time.”¹⁰ However, a more recent study by Crompton provides a long list of laws and documented cases gathered from across Europe that condemned sexual acts between women. He leaves no doubt in readers’ minds that lesbian acts were denounced regularly and publicly (at least since medieval times) and that the perpetrators of such acts were severely punished. Still, it is undeniable that the male homosexual—as homosexual—has been more visible longer in history. Moreover, his persecution has been more conspicuous, his elimination (by death, imprisonment, castration, excommunication, or therapy) has been more concerted, and his condition has been more researched at all times. Some reasons for this may simply be that men are usually more concerned with what other men do, think, or say; that men’s sexual lives are often conducted in the public as well as the private spheres (which makes them more obvious and therefore more vulnerable to changes); and that, traditionally, women’s homosexuality was seldom acknowledged as sexual. Lesbians

were more likely to be accused of being witches, spinsters, or anarchists.¹¹ Finally, another plausible speculation is that men's interest in women's sexual behavior is frequently limited to regulating it to ensure legitimate heirs, to control their access to women's sexuality and labor, and to maximize their own pleasure. Laws and customs reflect the central position men have reserved for themselves, particularly in sexual matters. "No matter what is going on, or . . . *not* going on, with respect to female arousal or orgasm, or in connection with the vagina, a pair can be said without semantic deviance to have had sex, or not to have had sex; the use of the term turns entirely on what was going on with respect to the penis."¹² Sexual acts between two women were often trivialized by men, if not denied completely,¹³ except in those instances where women were seen as having stepped outside their designated sphere in the private realm. In short, it can safely be said that lesbian behavior was condemned but that its denunciation was embedded in different social and historical bases from that of male homosexuality.

Louis Crompton reports the earliest secular laws enforced against lesbian acts (of which he is aware) as dating from 1270. They occurred in France and were an adaptation of or an addendum to a law meant to forbid male homosexuality.¹⁴ The first incident of capital punishment for lesbianism that Crompton cites is the drowning of a girl in Speier in 1477.¹⁵ From then on, records of condemnations of female homosexual acts are available from all over Christian Europe. Many of the women who were executed were caught cross-dressing or assuming the identity of men.¹⁶ Historical records are replete with examples of women who passed as men marrying women who were presumably (but not always) complicit in the deception.¹⁷

Although the most massive known persecution of women for sexual reasons occurred during the Inquisition in Europe, historical records indicate that women were frequently executed in Protestant Europe for similar "crimes." Mary Daly notes that the majority of those tortured and punished were females who were single or widowed, women who, she maintains, were "outside patriarchal control" because of their independence from men.¹⁸ The charge most frequently brought against them was indulgence in lewd acts with the devil, sexual promiscuity, and taking part in orgiastic rituals. Consequently, the Inquisitors felt righteously justified in burning witches once their "crimes" were established (usually after they were horrifyingly tortured). Good Christian men had to be protected. It was believed that women were more likely to fall prey to

demonically inspired desires because they are “more credulous, . . . are naturally more impressionable, have slippery tongues, are feebler both in mind and body, are more carnal than men(!) to the extent of having insatiable lust, have weak memories, [and] are liars by nature.”¹⁹

During the Renaissance in Europe there was an increase in the number of laws that specifically condemned sexual acts between women. Crompton mentions Spanish, French, Russian, and Swiss (Calvinist) cases where women were tried and executed under these laws.²⁰ North America was not immune to European influence. Crompton cites examples from New England early in the seventeenth century, where laws denouncing “carnal fellowship of man with man or woman with women” were considered but were not necessarily adopted.²¹ Contrary to the rest of Europe, England never had laws that specifically referred to female homosexual acts. Likewise, Canadian jurisprudence, which is based on English codes, at no time proscribed sexual acts between two women.²² Similarly, colonial Americans condemned nonprocreative sexual acts, sodomy, and buggery as sinful and therefore punishable, but, according to John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, “the laws almost always applied to men, not women, because they typically referred to the unnatural spilling of seed, the biblical sin of Onan.”²³

Religious and legal treatises were the major serious sources of discourse on the subject of sexuality until well into the nineteenth century, when the focus began to shift from “sin” to “crime” to a recognition that certain behavior can be isolated and described, and thus diagnosed and cured. Historians identify this period as transitional in that homosexual behavior began to be perceived in medical terms, and hence as a disorder rather than a sin. In 1869, Dr. Westphal of Berlin was one of the first to publish cases about what he identified as “contrary sexual feelings.”²⁴ A few years later, American and British doctors referred to “sexual inversion” and “sexual perversion” as parallel appellations to Westphal’s German phrase.

The explanation of what constituted those terms (*sexual inversion* or *perversion*) can be understood within the context of contemporary beliefs about sexuality in general. Early Victorian ideology propagated a cult of “true womanhood” and “true manhood” that ascribed to women and men characteristics from which they were not permitted to deviate if they “truly” belonged to their respective sex.²⁵ Katz explains: “The concept of true woman and true man equated biological femaleness and maleness with those constella-

tions of qualities collectively called 'femininity' and 'masculinity'. . . . Ministers, doctors and other ideologists of gender identified physiological sex with what may now be distinguished as socially determined, historically relative, gender-specific personality traits and temperaments."²⁶

This ideology also viewed women as passionless, incapable of sexual feelings, submitting to male aggressive desire only for the purpose of procreation. Chauncey observes that since the expression of women's sexual arousal was perceived as pathological by a number of sexologists of the time, "there was no place for lesbianism as it is currently understood: if women could not even respond with sexual enthusiasm to the advances of men, how could they possibly stimulate sexual excitement between themselves?"²⁷ Evidently, lesbian behavior contradicted the widely held view of women's passivity and complete lack of interest in sexual matters. Thus, to overcome the inherent contradiction between what was believed and what was observed, the theories of *sexual inversion* (congenital) or *sexual perversion* (acquired) were introduced. "A complete inversion or reversal of a woman's sexual character was required for her to act as a lesbian; she had literally to become man-like in her sexual desire."²⁸ Both these terms were applied to males as well and, in the same way, point to the Victorian belief in "naturally" determined gender roles. Thus a man described as an "invert" was perceived as effeminate, soft, gentle, and passive—in other words, "unmanly." Expressed in this way, it becomes apparent how fundamental to this theory was the conviction that sex was tied to notions of femininity and masculinity, that the behavior ascribed to each gender was radically different, distinct, and based on "natural" and/or "biological" characteristics. "Anatomy equalled mentality. A woman who did not display alleged mental, moral, and emotional qualities of her sex was a nonwoman."²⁹ In essence, Victorian polarization of gender roles, which dictated social behavior, provided the paradigm for gender-based sexual expectations. A woman who actively desired another woman ceased to be a woman. She became masculinized, a sexual invert or pervert. Lillian Faderman summarizes Victorian views of women's sexuality thus:

To the very end of the century . . . , the sexual potential of love between decent, healthy women was still unacknowledged by many seemingly sophisticated authors: sound women were asexual. It was doubtful enough that they would concern themselves with any form of sexual satisfaction, but that they would

seek sexual expression without a male initiator was as incredible as claiming to hear thunder play "God Save the King."³⁰

The concept of sexual inversion imbued the literature from the late nineteenth century well into the 1930s. For Kraft-Ebbing and George Beard, as well as for Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud, homosexual object choice implied an inversion of sexual character. Beard maintained in 1880 that "men became women and women men in their tastes, conduct, character, feelings and behaviour."³¹ Krafft-Ebbing described sexual perversion in terms of people whose behavior, thought, and character corresponded to those of the opposite sex rather than being congruent with the manner appropriate to their physiology and anatomy.³² Ellis noted in his *Sexual Inversion* that female inverts, from their "straightforwardness and sense of honour" to their "toleration for cigars," from their "incapacity for needlework" to their "brusque energetic movements," were unequivocally masculine in taste and behavior.³³ Finally, as Chauncey contends, "Freud, like Ellis and the whole turn-of-the-century sexology, continued to assert their 'character inversion' was a regular feature of *female* inversion, although no longer maintaining that this was true of male inverts."³⁴

The "sexual inversion" explanations were concerned primarily with the masculinized woman and neglected the partner, who seemed to fit those characteristics deemed appropriate to her gender. Jonathan Katz observes, "Quite often in the early medical literature, the 'feminine' member of a female couple was spoken of as if she was not also a 'pervert'; even her sexual activity with a 'pervert' did not affect essentially her own 'normal' status."³⁵ Apparently, the more aggressive woman posed a much greater threat to the Victorian perception of women's sexual and social role. Her behavior challenged the idea of females as passive, passionless, and powerless. This position is reinforced by historical evidence, which clearly demonstrates that women were persecuted far more for cross-dressing than for romantic involvements with members of their own sex.³⁶ Vern Bullough mentions St. Hildegund (died 1188), whose father dressed her in boys' clothing at age twelve to disguise her presence with him on his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. When her father later died, she continued to cross-dress even into adulthood to protect herself during her journey home. After a long series of adventures she finally returned to Germany and joined a monastery, where she remained until she died. Only then was she discovered to be a woman. She was later canonized. However, Joan of Arc

(1412–1431) was charged and executed precisely because she adamantly refused to don female clothing in addition to venturing into men's domain by engaging in combat.³⁷ Bullough concludes, "For a woman to assume a male guise for holy purposes was permitted, but to compete with men on such masculine grounds as warfare was simply not permitted, and a woman who was successful at such efforts must have been a witch."³⁸ Although his interpretation is questionable, given that the French people saw Joan as a saintly figure and that to play a masculine role is not necessarily to compete with men, it is curious that Bullough, himself a man, would perceive Joan's efforts as in contest with her male contemporaries.

One could argue that the Bible specifically forbade cross-dressing: "The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto man . . . for all that do so are an abomination unto the Lord thy God" (Deuteronomy 22:5), but then, why burn one woman as a witch for the same behavior that earned another sainthood? In addition, why were those women documented by Jonathan Katz and Alan Berube³⁹ put in asylums, jailed, or heavily fined? Their transgressions were not necessarily of a sexual nature; their crime was the adoption of the male prerogative to operate in the public sphere and in gender-reserved occupations. Conversely, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Nancy Sahli each cite abundant letters and diaries of women who formed passionate friendships with each other and who overlap in time with the "passing women" mentioned above. Both these authors agree that romantic attachments between women—and it is irrelevant for the argument whether these were sexual or not—fit more readily in the Victorian social organization and did not threaten the social order. Passionate love between women was considered, as Smith-Rosenberg notes, "both socially acceptable and fully compatible with heterosexual marriage."⁴⁰ As Sahli concludes, "As long as women loved each other as they did for much of the nineteenth century, without threatening the system itself, their relationships either were simply ignored by men or were regarded as an acceptable part of the female sphere."⁴¹

The Victorian sexologists based their conception of sex between women on a heterosexual model. One of the women had to assume the male role and, as such, was the invert. She was more easily recognizable. Consequently, she was described, derided, and disposed of as sick with greater frequency by the experts than was her "feminine" partner. Her visibility made her more vulnerable to exposure, but what is astonishing is that she does not make her appearance historically with such regularity until she is "discovered"

by the sexologists. This does not deny the existence of aggressive or homosexual women before the Victorian era, nor do I claim that the nineteenth century experts created these "masculine" women. Indeed, I agree with Chauncey that "such assumptions attribute inordinate power to ideology as an autonomous social force; they oversimplify the complex dialectic between social conditions, ideology and consciousness which produced gay identities."⁴² However, what the Victorian sex specialists did achieve was to make accessible detailed descriptions of what they perceived as discrete, pathological behavior and to define, record, and document innumerable case histories. Their work produced a recognizable image of the "female sexual invert" that could be used by the legal profession as well as by the police. Paradoxically, the very characteristics that were supposed to distinguish homosexual women may have been adopted by the women to make it possible for them to recognize one another.

Finally, one other outcome of the work of nineteenth century sexologists was that it put an end to the belief in female passionlessness. Women were now perceived as having sexual feelings in their own right. The age of innocence was over; the denial of female sexuality had come to an end.

It must be remembered, however, that the Victorian sex experts were but mildly interested in women's sexuality as such. The concern was a much wider notion of sex, particularly as it pertained to and was practiced by men. The idea was to define and to classify as many "sexual" acts as possible and to validate these with descriptive case histories. As Jeffrey Weeks notes, "The scientific and medical speculation can be seen as a product of the tendency of social sciences to differentiate traditionally execrated and monolithic crimes against nature into discrete deviations and to map their aetiologies."⁴³ The current discourse began with the notion of socially accepted sex—meaning, a man and a woman engaging in sexual intercourse within marriage and for the purpose of procreation. All sexual acts that fell outside this boundary were considered deviant. They were to be studied and analyzed, presumably so that people could diagnose them, warn against their potential harm, legislate prohibitions of those considered most virulent, and formulate cures where possible or adopt preventive measures against the more advanced or congenital instances.

Researchers collected case histories, and from these, ostensibly, they were able to create a profile of people most likely to commit specific deviant sexual acts. The tendency to attach deeds to those who act them out led to the identification of individuals by their be-

havior. In other words, people began to be characterized by the deviant acts they committed. This move from the concept of discrete deviant acts performed by individuals to the idea of a deviant profile may have begun the trend that would eventually lead to the recognition of deviant personalities. For the moment, *homosexuality* (the term preferred since the 1890s)⁴⁴ was but one of the many deviations that made its appearance in the Victorian era. As a concept, "it corresponded to clarification and articulation of a variety of social categories: the sexual child, the hysterical woman, the congenitally inclined prostitute,"⁴⁵ each a discrete entity that was studied and analyzed, classified and/or condemned.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw female homosexuality turn into a more ominous threat to the prevailing social structure. Sexual ideologists were now promoting a more "liberal" sexual morality, even if this actually translated into sex within the rigid bounds of heterosexual intercourse. It took the form of "companionate" marriages, which suited women's increased freedom compared with the limited spheres of the Victorian period but accommodated men even more. Christina Simmons observes, "Companionate marriage represents the attempt of mainstream marriage ideology to adapt to women's perceived new social and sexual power."⁴⁶ This new "freedom" consisted of such social reforms as women's suffrage (eventually), easier divorce, legalized birth control, and the availability of sex education for the young.⁴⁷ Companionate marriage recognized that women are sexual beings, that they may enjoy sex for other than procreative reasons, and that they have a right to learn as well as to earn. Companionate marriage was an idealized notion that was to bring men and women together in marriage on equal terms (more or less) and that was to be based on friendship, sexual intimacy, and companionship. Essentially, as Simmons notes, "companionate marriage directed female sexual energies toward men and marriage."⁴⁸ The separate spheres for each sex that were the mainstay of Victorian social order were now suddenly outmoded and derided, seen as obstacles to the new concepts of heterosexual romance and camaraderie. Nevertheless, women stood to gain very little by the considerations that accompanied companionate marriages. As Jeffrey Weeks suggests, "What was at stake . . . was the notion of reciprocity in sexual pleasure, but not the obliteration of gender distinctions, or sexual libertarianism."⁴⁹

Middle-class white women's increased education and consequent entry into some professions decidedly gave them more alternatives. They were heavily opting to remain single, to live with

other women (Boston marriages), and to devote their lives to a profession. Many of these women clearly understood that, even with the recent reforms, gender inequalities were certainly not abolished and, in many ways, not even perceptibly diminished. Consequently, they often chose to remain single.⁵⁰

The literature of the time denigrated relationships between women, Boston marriages, and spinsters. Indeed, Sheila Jeffreys argues that it was the desire to undermine women's political and social gains, which threatened traditional male access to women, that provoked a vigorous attack on spinsters, one that was aimed at discrediting them. "This threat was particularly serious when independent women were engaged in passionate friendships with each other and were in a position to form a strong female network which could bond against men."⁵¹ Linking any choice outside of heterosexual marriages and liaisons with lesbianism, frustration, perversion, and loneliness, the prevailing ideology strongly discouraged female independence from men. Simmons concludes, "Whether female resistance to heterosexual relationships actually occurred or not, the recognition of sexual inequality engendered in the culture a male *fear* of resistance, often expressed as a fear of lesbianism."⁵² There was a preponderance of articles and authoritative treatises on female homosexuality, mostly in relation to heterosexuality. It was perceived as a deviation from the "normal" primarily because women who failed to try to appeal to or pretend interest in men were presumably attempting to save face. Ostensibly, they were suffering from not having been picked by a man or from being rejected by one. Nevertheless, it was frequently seen as potential female subversion or as possible opposition to heterosexuality, as Simmons observes. As such, it presented "a cultural meaning that homosexuality had not carried in the nineteenth century."⁵³

The decades between 1910 and 1930 produced much of the popular literature that promulgated such stereotypical notions of female homosexuality as an immature choice, a lack of responsibility, and a degrading alternative to heterosexuality. It was also an era when eroticism pervaded the culture and when words and phrases that earlier had had no particular libidinous connotations now acquired new lubricious significances. Jonathan Katz writes "‘Lesbian’, which through the teens in the dominant culture meant, simply, one from Lesbos, by the 1930s referred specifically to woman-to-woman eroticism."⁵⁴ Katz claims that the eroticization of the word *lesbian* can be traced from medical reports to the *New York Times* book reviews of the period.

The word *lesbian*, used to relate to female homosexuals, refers to the poet Sappho, who lived on the island of Lesbos approximately between 612 and 558 B.C. and who wrote love poems addressed to young women. These popular poems were celebrated in her era throughout the Greek world. She was a teacher, a poet, and a well-known figure in her day, yet what remains of her poetry are fragments recovered after her work was destroyed by fire at two different historical times and places. Her love songs to women condemned her to centuries of obscurity, disgrace, disrepute, denial, and even infamy. She embodied all that was threatening to men/critics, who felt excluded from her poetry, slighted by her subject matter, and ignored by her choice of love object. She was ridiculed in her day, Dolores Klaich maintains, not for her love of women, but because she was attached to no man as was customary for all decent Athenian women. It was not until the Romans that her sexuality became an issue.⁵⁵ Perhaps because of the sheer beauty of her poetry, or maybe just through miraculous chance, she survived until our time.

At the turn of the century her name was appropriated and came to denote a sexual preference. "Sapphic love" described the erotic attraction and intimacy that developed between two women. In addition, Sappho's beloved island gives its name today to women who love women. This was started in the 1930s when the word *lesbian* began to appear synonymously with euphemistic expressions or diagnostic terms such as *intermediate sex*, *sex variant*, *invert*, and *deviant*. A considerable body of mainstream writing warned against and declared "unnatural" all forms of same-sex attachments. The easy accessibility, mostly to the white middle class, of such admonishing literature, often published in women's magazines, was seen as necessary in the face of perceived increases in the incidence of lesbianism. While the medical profession was producing a large discourse disparaging any hint of female independence (sexual or economic) from men, bourgeois women were producing a literature of their own covertly (and sometimes overtly) legitimating their newfound relative freedom.⁵⁶ But this was also the era of the much-publicized condemnation and eventual censorship of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). The book, declared obscene in a court of law, was banned in England. It was also the period when the "scandalous" lives of American ex-patriates living in Paris became well known, discussed, and "envied." These women, Natalie Barney, Djuna Barnes, Renée Vivien, and others, contemporaries of but not in the same league as Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas,

were all artists, notorious or famed in their heyday. At the same time, in London, Vita Stackville-West, the Bloomsbury group, and various published authors (Foster, Woolf, and H.D., to name a few) were discretely involved with members of their own sex.⁵⁷ As Simmons observes succinctly, it was an interval in history when “lesbianism represented women’s autonomy in various forms—feminism, careers, refusal to marry, failure to adjust to marital sexuality.”⁵⁸

By the 1930s, the sexual ideologues had finally established that female homosexuality was an unacceptable deviation, that women’s sexuality in general, although recognized, should be channeled within the narrow confines of heterosexuality with a view toward marriage and family, and that lesbians were frustrated, unfulfilled, lonely drifters forever deprived of the joys of heterosexual matehood.

The interwar years, although not very different from the previous two decades, were marked by conflicting moral ideologies that existed side by side. On the one hand, there was an emphasis on sexual harmony and pleasure for both partners in marriage, an increased awareness of female sexual needs, and a growing interest in sex education. On the other hand, there was the inveterate middle-class Christian beliefs of the sanctity of the family, the ideal permanence of marriage, and the inviolate roles of each gender. “Purity, familism, public decency remained the social norms which the apparatus of formal moral regulation sought to uphold.”⁵⁹ The social climate dictated a particular mode of behavior, and whatever diverged from the norm was perceived as deviant. Later, during the World War II years, there is evidence, cited by Ruth Roach Pierson, that, at least in the United States, the war was “interpreted as liberating for lesbian women in the sense of living and working away from home and in same sex communities [which] provided a better opportunity for discovery and/or expression of their sexual preference.”⁶⁰

Jeffrey Weeks mentions a tendency articulated during the interwar years that was becoming increasingly significant. This was the growing acceptance of the medical model by psychiatrists, psychologists, and sexologists. “Vice and moral turpitude could be replaced by ‘psychological disorders’ as the explanatory mode,” says Weeks. He goes on to show that, consequently, moral norms did not need to be changed, that “indeed they could be reinforced by new conceptualizations.”⁶¹ By the 1950s, the medical model took a firm hold as the dominant sexual ideology. Mental health experts defined, described, and proscribed behavior in the sexual sphere according to “normal,” “natural” standards and deviations thereof.

The prevailing opinion was that women's function was to produce and rear children within the confines of marriage and under the financial and protective care of a man. Women who did not conform to this view were "normally deficient in the quality of womanliness and the particular physical and mental attributes of their sex."⁶² Given these authoritative assertions, there was very little room for behavior that differed from normative order. Homosexual women were pathological and with proper treatment could and should be cured.

In 1955, Frank S. Caprio wrote what was, for a long time, considered a definitive work on female homosexuality. He wrote, "Psychoanalysts are in agreement that all women who prefer a homosexual way of life suffer from a distorted sense of values and betray their emotional immaturity in their attitude toward men, sex, and marriage."⁶³ Caprio believed, as did most of his contemporaries, that homosexuality was a symptom of maladjustment. To him, there were two kinds of lesbians, the overt (self-acknowledged, predominantly homosexual) and the latent (the unconscious homosexual). He assumed that experienced lesbians seduced innocent women. He claimed that lesbians shared certain qualities that were typical of their immature personalities:

1. Strong reactions of jealousy.
2. Definite sado-masochistic trends characterized by behavior actions of hostility alternating with feelings of self-pity. All lesbians invariably display marked feelings of ambivalence toward themselves, their partners, their parents and people in general.
3. Strong feelings of guilt whether they are overtly admitted or manifested via hysterical conversion phenomena such as a multiplicity of health complaints.
4. Pronounced sense of insecurity.⁶⁴

Caprio and his contemporaries did not attempt to question the source of such feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Women's behavior was not placed in context, and there was little effort to understand the role of social, economic, or political elements or what other factors may have contributed to the low self-esteem, the insecurity, and the various complaints that seemed to have been prevalent in the women they diagnosed.

A plethora of books and articles appeared in response to or as an explanation of the statistical picture that appeared with the publication of Kinsey's (et al.) *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* in 1953. The report's findings left no doubt as to the incidence

of female homosexuality, and many authorities turned their attention to the problem of clarifying this phenomenon. The discourse focused on why people become sexually and/or psychologically inverted, what cure there is for such behavior, whether the condition is congenital or acquired, and how homosexuals differ from "normal" people. The aetiological debates raged and theories abounded. It was presumed that if the causes could be isolated, homosexuality could be prevented and homosexuals restored to "health." Thus vigorous energy was spent tracking down the causes of this and other pathologies. No agreement was reached. However, identifiable characteristics did emerge as illustrated by D. J. West, who wrote in 1955:

Lesbianism and male homosexuality probably spring from the same roots. In both cases neurotic family background, typified by sexual maladjustment and marital discord, colours most of their personal histories. All the most important factors concerned in the inhibition of heterosexuality—Oedipal conflict, fear of sex, guilty feelings, sense of inferiority—occur in women as well as men.⁶⁵

West believed that lesbians were more disturbed than their male counterparts, that they tended toward aggressiveness and tomboyishness in childhood, and that they experienced feelings of rejection by the opposite sex. He summed it up with the following: "One psychological characteristic of many lesbians that all observers seem to agree about is rebellion against their sexual status, but . . . the inferior position of women in our culture provides a partial explanation for this reaction."⁶⁶ Unfortunately, this surprising insight was ignored by West and his contemporaries as they continued their search for causes and cures.

West's views are not uncommon. They are peculiar to the discourse of his time. His assertions on the topic differ slightly from the conceptualizations that emerged in the next two decades. As late as in 1972 (post-Stonewall, the 1969 riots which mark the beginning of the gay liberation movement in the U.S.), Jack H. Hedblom wrote an article (still considered significant in some psychological and sociological circles) entitled "The Female Homosexual: Social and Attitudinal Dimensions." In it he summarizes the main explanatory models of homosexuality, which he classifies under three approaches. The first is the medical model, which "assumes that homosexuality is the result of an underlying psychological or

physiological pathology.”⁶⁷ Hedblom does not agree or disagree with this model: he presents it as the dominant one in the literature. The second approach is the psychoanalytic one, which Hedblom accurately refutes because it “precludes the possibility of there being a psychologically healthy homosexual.”⁶⁸ Hedblom bases his criticism on the 1957 ground-breaking study by Evelyn Hooker, in which she matched thirty well-adjusted homosexual men with thirty well-adjusted heterosexual men in age, IQ, and education. Judges who were asked to distinguish between the sets of people were unable to do so.

Another positive picture came from the English Wolfenden Report at that time. It stated that homosexuality was not pathological, that “normal” behavior was culturally biased, and that homosexual persons were virtually indistinguishable in everything but their sexual preference from nonhomosexuals. It also recommended that criminal penalties be removed from private consensual acts between adults.⁶⁹

Finally, the third approach Hedblom mentions is the Family Interaction Model, which held that homosexuality was due to early parental influences on the child. Although Hedblom criticizes this view initially, he seems seduced by many of its arguments. He sums up his own preference: “Given the inherent weakness of each model, a combination of models must be used to locate the etiology of inverted psychosexual identity in the role structure of the family and the social support for the ongoing homosexual activity in the specialized community of the lesbian.”⁷⁰

Hedblom’s views typify the pre-gay liberation conceptualizations about homosexuality. He writes in 1972, after the Stonewall riots, which marked the birth of the current North American movement, and yet he seems untouched by the events. His study is situated in the lesbian subculture but he does not seem aware of any lesbian social or political organizations such as the Daughters of Bilitis⁷¹ or contemporary publications such as *The Ladder*.⁷² Despite his shortcomings, his views seem almost refreshing after the proscriptive literature of the first half of the twentieth century, although his perceptions are steeped in the thinking of his time. Like his contemporaries, his work is impervious to the historical events that give a context to the “cases” he reports. Women did not live in a vacuum then any more than they do now. Pre-Stonewall accounts by mental health authorities and social scientists isolated their reports of “deviant” behavior, rarely considered the consequences of such obvious and overt persecution as the McCarthy era in the

United States, and continued the attempt to explicate homosexuality by posing aetiological questions. Hedblom, at least, is able to admit that discrimination exists against lesbians and that their socially stigmatized identity combined with pressures to conform potentially leads to the unstable lifestyle so often reported in the literature. It took one more year beyond Hedblom's article before the American Psychiatric Association (in 1973) removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders.

Mary McIntosh's "The Homosexual Role"⁷³ is one of the most significant articles written at this time. Published in 1968, it paved the way for current discourses by arguing that "the homosexual should be seen as playing a social role rather than as having a condition."⁷⁴ The emphasis was beginning to be placed on society and how it constructed stigmatized identities of homosexuals. Over a decade later, Robert Padgug wrote, "To 'commit' a homosexual act is one thing, to *be* a homosexual is something entirely different."⁷⁵ But the concept of a gay identity was not widely recognized. Until it would be, homosexuals would be understood to suffer from "deviant" personalities, the profiles of which were well described and documented. Only homosexual identity could permit the potential achievement of a gay liberation. Being seen as "sick" is not only isolating; it tacitly blames the individual weakness for contributing to the sickness. An identity (even if stigmatized) by definition implies belonging to a group—in this case, a large number of people who would be eventually propelled into the radical politics of the sixties with its understanding of oppression as socially instigated and not a personal character trait peculiar to a "deviant" person.

The discourse shifted with the advent of the feminist and gay liberations. Homosexuality was no more a "pathological condition" any more than it was a "sin" half a century earlier. In an interview discussing her 1968 article, Mary McIntosh was asked how the gay and feminist movements have affected her views. She replied, "I now think that what needs to be understood is heterosexuality and that you can't understand homosexuality without locating it in sexuality in general."⁷⁶

The discourses now recognized "that the concept of 'the homosexual' is a historical creation, and that a necessary distinction has to be made between homosexual behavior, which the evidence shows is present in most cultures, and homosexual identities, which the same evidence shows to be comparatively rare, and in our own culture of fairly recent origin."⁷⁷

The current debate seems to center on several persuasive theories. One is *symbolic interactionism*, whose adherents (Gagnon and Simon; Plummer) view "homosexuality as a process emerging through interactive encounters (part of which include potentially hostile reaction) in an intersubjective world."⁷⁸ As Weeks points out, this viewpoint has been unable to explicate why sexual variations occur, "nor has it been able to conceptualize the relations between possible sexual patterns and other social variables, nor explain why there are constant shifts in the location of historical taboos on sexuality."⁷⁹ In fact, Weeks continues, symbolic interactionism stops at the point of historical determination and ideological structuring in the creation of subjectivity, considered essential in current theorization.⁸⁰ With respect to lesbians specifically, Gagnon and Simon argue that a central contention of their work rests on their belief that "the female homosexual follows conventional feminine patterns in developing her commitment to sexuality and in conducting not only her sexual career but her nonsexual career as well."⁸¹ Faraday's critique of Gagnon and Simon stresses a feminist perspective. She takes exception to their assertion, as well as to the title of their chapter ("A Conformity Greater than Deviance: The Lesbian"). She claims that implicit in Gagnon and Simon's analysis is the notion that only men can be deviant. Since lesbians are similar to and conform with heterosexual women in their sexual patterns of development, Gagnon and Simon see fit to explain them away in terms of their "femininity." Thus "they describe 'the lesbian' in terms of 'a conformity greater than deviance' because of her 'essential femininity.'"⁸²

With the increasing influence of psychoanalytic and post-modern discourses, French influence surfaced with the views of several thinkers, of whom two in particular seem to touch the English-speaking debate. The first is Guy Hocquenghem, who relies on Jacques Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud to argue that homosexual desire, like the heterosexual, "is an arbitrary division of the flux of desire, which in itself is polyvocal and undifferentiated so that the notion of exclusive homosexuality is a 'fallacy of the imaginary,' a misrecognition and ideological misperception. Nevertheless homosexuality has a vivid social presence, and this is because it expresses an aspect of desire which appears nowhere else."⁸³ Hocquenghem believes that repression came as a consequence of establishing homosexuality as a separate category. Weeks finds many flaws in Hocquenghem's arguments, not the least of which is that

he still does not answer why some people choose homosexuality rather than heterosexuality. Furthermore, his work does not explain the recent liberation in attitude toward homosexuality.

The other French thinker is the late Michel Foucault. His work addresses the idea that knowledge is the basis of power. For instance, knowledge of condoned sexuality is produced in the process of the state's separation of what is delinquent from what is nondelinquent. Social institutions have been engaged in defining normative behavior based on this separation initially effected by the "disciplines." Science does not only discover and describe what goes on in society, but it also constructs the social experience in the process of articulating it. Thus, for example, in the case of sex, the definition of normative sexuality rests in the hands of those with the power to direct its definition. Foucault believed that sexuality was not defined by discourse but that it was defined *as* discourse. Talk about sex produced the uniform truth about sex. Foucault's concern was not necessarily with historical evidence regarding sexually repressive or libertarian periods, nor was he essentially interested in documenting which particular sexual acts were permitted or forbidden, when, and why. His preoccupation was with such questions as *who* does the speaking regarding sex, the positions and perspectives from which these speakers speak, and which institutions are involved in the production and dissemination of the discourses produced. Briefly, what was at issue for Foucault was, in his words, "the overall 'discursive fact', the way in which sex is 'put into discourse.'"⁸⁴ Gary Kinsman elaborates: "Sexual types and categories were socially constructed by identifiable power groups and the notion of sexuality as the truth of our identity and being was created by the power relations which simultaneously defined the meaning of sexuality."⁸⁵ Homosexuality as a form of sexuality appeared when it stopped being perceived as an act of sodomy and began to be conceptualized as an inherent part of the individual's personality. In Foucault's words, "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species."⁸⁶

Foucault is controversial, and much of what he wrote remains ambiguous. He has been accused of idealism by Marxists and reviewed as too speculative or too theoretical, but for my purpose, one of the strongest critiques has come from Catherine MacKinnon:

Although Foucault understands that sexuality must be discussed at the same time as method, power, class, and the law, he does not systematically comprehend the specificity of

gender—women's and men's relation to these factors—as a primary category for comprehending them. As one result, he cannot distinguish between the silence about sexuality that Victorianism has made into a noisy discourse and the silence that has *been* women's sexuality under conditions of subordination by and to men.⁸⁷

Few can deny that Foucault left an imprint on contemporary thought, whatever his inconsistencies or oversights.

Whether promoted by Foucault, Lacan, Hocquenghem, the social interactionists, or the pre-gay movement authorities, most of these major theoretical frameworks, however liberating, challenging, or revolutionary, remain almost invariably male centered and male defined. They also mostly reflect white middle-class intellectual trends. In addition, for the most part, gay literature has proven to be unable to understand or explicate women's issues. Consequently, one of the most fundamental innovations of radical contemporary thinking was the early distinction between gay male and lesbian perspectives. Theoretically, much of gay male and lesbian issues may potentially be discussed simultaneously when dealing with aetiological problems or with questions of power, class, or color. However, in the final analysis, gender necessarily reorganizes the enquiry because of the shift in viewpoint.

Lesbian sexualities can only be understood within the framework of women's place in society. Contemporary feminists have reclaimed the right to articulate women's issues from where we, as women, are situated in the social organization. But they could not and did not speak for all women. It must be remembered that, concurrent with white middle-class women, and often different from them in circumstances and location, black women, women of color, Jewish women, and working-class women were living different experiences and developing histories of their own. However, as Robin Morgan reminds us, "Feminism itself dares to assume that, beneath all our (chosen or forced) diversity, we are in fact much the same—yet the *ways* in which we are similar are not for any one woman or group of women to specify, but for all of us, collectively, to explore and define—a multiplicity of feminisms."⁸⁸ Therefore, in the case of sexuality, whereas it may be claimed that homosexual oppression (male or female) stems primarily from ideological levels, lesbian oppression takes on added economic, political, and ideological expression because lesbians are women.⁸⁹ However, within the experience of being lesbian, differences are present according to race and

class. Yet, as Margaret Coulson reminds us, "In any patriarchal society the definition of women's sexuality (and men's) is embedded in the definition of femininity (and masculinity) and both develop out of and in relation to the sexual division of labour." Coulson believes that the sexual division of labor constructs a social separation between the sexes and that this is both an acknowledgment and an elaboration of the biological differences that may or may not exist between them. It also establishes a social and economic dependence of women on men, thus putting a premium on heterosexuality.⁹⁰ Essentially, then, as Annabel Faraday argues, it has been assumed that because both lesbians and gay men share characteristic oppressions from mainstream society by virtue of the fact that both are stigmatized on the basis of their sexual preference, what is *not* recognized is that "while both lesbians and gay men are not 'heterosexual', heterosexuality itself is a power relationship of men over women; what gay men and lesbians are rejecting are essentially polar experiences."⁹¹ Men, whether straight or gay, share a similar position because of their gender in patriarchal societies in general and in Western capitalist cultures in particular. Gay men are seen as rejecting their male prerogative if they "choose" to be publicly identified as gay. A lesbian's relation to power, depending on her race and class, her place in society, and her presumed economic dependence on men, rarely distinguishes her from her heterosexual sisters. However, in her choice to love other women she is perceived not only as denying males their assumed claim to her body and services but also as implicitly renouncing her gender because she violates the expectations deemed appropriate for women. MacKinnon explains: "Sex as gender and sex as sexuality are thus defined in terms of each other, but it is sexuality that determines gender, not the other way around."⁹² Ostensibly, a woman who asserts the primacy of her own self and her needs, who reclaims the right to refuse her sexual availability to men, or who defies the fundamental premises of patriarchal society that contain, restrain, inhibit, determine, and define women's sphere, loses the "privilege" of being a woman. The early 1970s group called Radicalesbians expressed this view somewhat graphically but accurately when they wrote, "A lesbian is not considered a 'real woman'. And yet, in popular thinking, there is really only one essential difference between a lesbian and other women: that of sexual orientation—which is to say, when you strip off all the packaging, you must finally realize that the essence of being a woman is to get fucked by men."⁹³ This notion may seem simplistic at first glance, yet upon closer examination it articulates much of women's history as written by men.