The question of how to theorize historical discourses of sex has received much critical attention since Foucault first developed his influential model of sexuality as the product of historical and socioeconomic contingency. Foucault’s approach has rightly been criticized for marginalizing issues of gender, as queer and feminist critics have turned attention to the complex intersections between concepts of sexual behavior and ideas of gender. Investigations of female sexuality in particular, ranging from the reconstructive lesbian histories of Martha Vicinus and others to the queer cultural histories of female gender advanced by Judith Halberstam, have complicated our understanding of how to theorize the experiential realities of historical sexual subjects whose words and thoughts have not always been preserved. These distinct, frequently opposing studies typically approach the theorization of sexological taxonomies in relation to ideas of modern sexual identity formation, importantly scrutinizing the impact and validity of identity labels and identifying gaps in existing histories of sexuality. But how can we understand the meanings of sexual concepts at the point of their inception? What does a historic semantics of sex tell us about the gendered emergence of sexual theory,
including both the role of studies of female sexuality for the emergence of sexology and the contributions of women to the theorization of sex outside the scientific realm?

This article shifts attention from issues of sexual identity to questions of discipline formation, exploring the role of constructions of female sexuality in the making of a scientia sexualis as well as the theorization of inversion within feminist discourses of the later nineteenth century. It focuses on the notion of “sexual inversion,” a term denoting same-sex phenomena that emerged in debates around the foundation of a unified German Empire in 1871 and became hugely influential in same-sex writings published across Europe at the end of the century. In France, for example, Marc-André Raffalovich published his affirmative study of same-sex sexuality as L’uranisme: Inversion sexuelle congénitale (Uranism: Congenital Sexual Inversion), published in 1895, while the earliest English study of same-sex sexuality by John Addington Symonds and Havelock Ellis was first published in German translation as Das konträre Geschlechtsgefühl (Contrary Sexual Feeling) in 1896 before appearing in English in 1897 as Sexual Inversion. Gert Hekma has shown that within these sexological discourses inversion referred to the idea of same-sex sexuality as a kind of gender inversion.

More recently, Claudia Breger has examined the meanings of “female inversion” at the turn of the twentieth century. She usefully suggests that to understand more fully the production of knowledge about gender and sexuality, including female contributions, we need to examine the scientific terminology alongside wider cultural metaphors of inversion. While Breger’s analysis is closely linked to current debates about identity and queer theory, the focus of my own investigation is on the making of a
gendered sexual theory. I concentrate on the last decades of the nineteenth century, when concepts of inversion first circulated. I show that the discourse of male inversion was tied to the emergence of sexual identity, coined to describe male same-sex practices and overtly politicized in discourses of the emerging modern state. In contrast, female inversion was largely tied to issues of social rather than sexual difference, at least initially, and to the mapping of distinctly configured roles for men and women. Accordingly, a notion of inversion also played a role in broader cultural discourses around the so-called woman question of the 1880s and 1890s. Critics have documented how misogynist responses to emerging feminism typically focused on what they perceived to be the “manhishness” of the so-called New Woman. I suggest that feminists in turn appropriated a notion of female inversion understood as a form of rational female masculinity, formulating an affirmative feminist project that politicized gender but marginalized female same-sex sexuality.

The article addresses methodological as well as thematic questions by focusing on some of the distinctions and overlappings between German and English sexual discourses at the turn of the last century. The first section, “Perverse Positions, Reverse Positioning,” situates my work in relation to existing scholarship, explaining my approach, including its focus on a term that is now obsolete. I am interested in inversion precisely because its outmoded usage is not conducive to constructing genealogies of modern sexual identity. However, the larger connotations of the concept—the idea that there exist fixed gender roles that can be reversed—also reflect some of the pervasive assumptions of a Western cultural tradition that has long conceptualized sex in binary terms. The article
develops a linguistically informed, culturally comparative approach that examines the more closely defined meanings of inversion within the emerging *scientia sexualis* as well as the broader discourse of female inversion played out around emerging feminist discourses of the fin de siècle.

The second section, “Sexual Subjects/Subjects of State: Nation Formation and the Theorization of Male Inversion,” explores the distinctly gendered trajectory of inversion discourses in relation to the emerging *scientia sexualis*, explaining how the male invert was conceptualized in response to a new discourse of citizenship around the formation of a unified German state. I trace the emergence of sexual inversion in the 1860s in the work of the lawyer and homosexual rights activist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, for whom female sexuality was a mere afterthought, arguing that while his theories were specific to the German context, the classical Greek genealogy of his vocabulary indicates their place in a Western tradition that theorized sex in binary terms.

The third section, “Sexology and the Female Invert,” considers the complex signification of the female sexual invert within mainstream sexology. Here I focus on Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s engagement with female same-sex behaviors in the 1880s, including the translation of his ideas into English. This section reveals that issues of female inversion were tied to some of the most pressing debates within the *scientia sexualis* such as the criminalization of same-sex sexuality, the measurement of functionality in the female sexual body, and, perhaps most surprisingly, the problem of the marginalization of women within the discipline of sexology.
The fourth section, “Feminist Inverts and Marginalization of Female Same-Sex Desire,” returns to questions of method and the history of sexual theory. It moves from the sexological realm to the wider cultural sphere, considering female inversion as a concept associated with emerging feminist discourses. This section suggests that while women lacked political recognition as sexual subjects, a notion of female inversion understood broadly in terms of female masculinity played an important role in affirmative feminist discourses. The feminist invert, I argue, became focused on ideas of gender rather than sexual identity, complicating our understanding of Foucauldian notions of reverse discourse and the construction of sexuality.

**Perverse Positions, Reverse Positioning**

How can one study the historic meanings of female inversion? Feminist analyses of the later nineteenth century such as Lucy Bland’s influential study *Banishing the Beast* have shown how nineteenth-century feminist engagements with sexual issues were tied to wider debates about sexual danger, heterosexual pleasure, and, eventually, the development of a new lesbian identity. Bland emphasizes the gendering of early inversion debates, arguing that the late Victorian discourses and reverse discourses of same-sex sexuality were male dominated. They circulated, she argues, in both scientific and lay milieux as “sexological stereotypes [that] were not simply imposed on a passive community. The leading sexologists, such as Havelock Ellis and Krafft-Ebing, were supporters of homosexual rights and observed and listened to members of the (predominantly male) subcultures; further a number of sex theorists were themselves
homosexual." These male same-sex histories have received substantial critical attention in studies by Joseph Bristow, Matt Cook, Jonathan Dollimore, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Jeffrey Weeks, to name but a few who have analyzed the rich archive of literary, legal, and private documents of men who had sex with men and identified their desire in the language of the emerging scientia sexualis. In contrast, as Bland and others have shown, women who identified themselves as “inverts” came to the fore later than their male counterparts, which helps to explain why studies of women and sexology by Terry Castle, Erin Carlston, and others have focused more typically on the urban same-sex circles of post-World War I Europe, where we find a flourishing culture of what Laura Doan has called sapphic modernism.

The works of queer theorists and historians of same-sex sexuality provide some of the conceptual tools for analyzing the female same-sex discourses of the later nineteenth century. George Chauncey, in his important article on the changing conceptualization of female deviance, has shown that sexual inversion “did not denote the same conceptual phenomenon as homosexuality. ‘Sexual inversion’ referred to a broad range of deviant sexual behaviors of which homosexual desire was only a logical but indistinct aspect.” Chauncey, developing Foucault’s discursive approach, importantly draws attention to the fact that the nuanced taxonomies of sex were not necessarily congruent with concepts of identity but that they evolved to describe broader categories of people. It has been more difficult, however, to develop new queer feminist methodologies that assess the specific contributions of historic female gender and sexuality phenomena to the emergence of sexual theory. Judith Halberstam, who in her Female Masculinity
develops a queer presentist approach, summarizes the issues as follows:

It has proven quite difficult to theorize sexuality and gender deviance in historical ways, and often the field is divided between untheoretical historical surveys and ahistorical theoretical models. Debates about the history of sexuality and the history of gender deviance have also very often reproduced this split, rendering historical sexual forms as either universal or completely bound by their historical moment. The challenge for new queer history has been, and remains, to produce methodologies sensitive to historical change but influenced by current theoretical preoccupations.¹⁰

Halberstam develops a narrative of female masculinity that historicizes female contributions to the formation of modern masculinity. Her critique of sexology focuses on what she perceives to be the discipline’s phenomenological failure--she argues that sexological taxonomies do not adequately describe the full range of historical genders rather than taking issues with the process of classification itself.¹¹ Halberstam’s method has proved invaluable for thinking about the limits of sexual identity labels and, especially, for spotting gendered gaps (such as what she calls “female masculinity”) in existing histories of sexuality. Sharon Marcus, in her recent study *Between Women*, seeks to write a new female same-sex historiography that focuses on expressions of same-sex attraction outside the scientific sphere. She takes in a new direction Lillian Faderman’s earlier argument that sexology pathologized romantic friendship between women by arguing that there already existed varied female same-sex phenomena that predated the new sexual taxonomy.¹²
My own approach adds a renewed focus on the semantics of sex to these debates. I want to ask a reverse set of questions, moving from how sexology classified gender to an analysis of the meanings of the new sexual vocabulary in different contexts. Historians of sexuality such as Lisa Duggan and Harry Oosterhuis have paved the way for this kind of investigation, developing epistemological approaches that examine the kinds of knowledge about sex that circulated at specific historical moments. While the scope of their projects is different (Oosterhuis reassesses Krafft-Ebing’s work, while Duggan examines discourses about lesbianism and violence), methodologically they open useful common ground: a renewed focus on discursive context rather than the experiential reality of sexual subjects. Their approach is not a return to those important earlier reconstructive projects of same-sex theorists such as Hekma or Faderman who focused on the recuperation of marginalized lives that have been “hidden from history,” to borrow from the title of one of the milestone collections in gay and lesbian studies. Instead, it examines the very structures of debate that marginalized the discourses of female same-sex sexuality. I want to develop this line of thinking further, taking a culturally comparative approach focused on the making of sexual theory itself so as to move from more specific histories of sexuality to larger historic fields of sexual knowledge production and to understand more fully both the construction of female sexuality within sexology and the ways in which women theorized sex within feminism. While the sexological female invert was closely tied to investigations of sexual behavior (congressus intersexualis feminarum [sexual intercourse between women], or at least the desire for it to take place, was one of the most basic sexological measures for
identifying female inversion), there also existed a feminist invert who sought to critique cultural metaphors for gender.\textsuperscript{15} It is here in the messy field of overlapping cultural, political, and scientific discourses that we find further insights into the meanings of female sexual inversion in relation to conceptualizations of the nineteenth-century social body as well as for the making of sexual theory.

**Sexual Subjects/Subjects of State: Nation Formation and the Theorization of Male Inversion**

Inversion was theorized primarily as a male phenomenon that marginalized women because it was tied to issues of law and citizenship and to the well-documented discourses of modern state formation of the later nineteenth century. The German lawyer Karl Heinrich Ulrichs coined “sexual inversion” as the principle of same-sex desire in his affirmative writings on same-sex sexuality. In a theoretical pamphlet entitled *Prometheus*, published in 1870 as part of his twelve-volume *Forschungen über das Räthsel der mannmännlichen Liebe* (Studies into the Riddle of Love between Men), Ulrichs wrote (in Latin) that a man who loves men is someone with “a female soul confined in a male body,” establishing the notion of sexual inversion as a kind of gender inversion. The equivalent for women who love women, Ulrichs wrote, would be “a male soul is confined to the female body,” but he considered female sexuality largely as a logical exercise rather than as reality.\textsuperscript{16} Critics including Hekma, Hubert Kennedy, and Wolfram Setz have scrutinized Ulrichs’s role as a forerunner of male-oriented gay rights activism, but the implications of his conceptual work for understanding the *scientia sexualis* deserve further attention.
Ulrichs's sexual theories were motivated in part by the volatile situation in the German states where in the 1860s Prussia increasingly dominated the political landscape. In a bid for the unification of the independent German states Prussia threatened to replace the different legal statutes of the sovereign German states with its own penal code. Unlike many of the other states, which had gradually eliminated the medieval prohibitions on male and female sodomy that had once been in place, Prussia still criminalized same-sex behavior in Paragraph 143 of its penal code. In contrast, many of the penal codes of smaller states such as Ulrichs’s native Hanover followed the more moderate Code Napoléon and did not criminalize same-sex acts. Ulrichs's legal training gave him the necessary expertise to foresee the devastating impact of Prussia’s increasing power, and he started lobbying against the criminalization of men who loved men. In 1867, for example, he addressed a meeting of lawyers from different German states who aimed to work toward unification by ensuring the assimilation of the various legal systems. He submitted for discussion a petition demanding that “the inborn love for men” be decriminalized in all German states. Ulrichs outlined the case for his formal appeal in a speech entitled “Nature’s Riddle of Urning Love and the Error of the Legislator,” which argued that sexual acts and desires are natural rather than social phenomena and hence not within the remit of the law. Coining the term Urning (Uranian) for men who love men, Ulrichs went on to evoke the idea of same-sex-loving subjects as a “class of humans to which belong many of the greatest and most noble thinkers of our own nation as well as foreign nations.”
Ulrichs’s petition was rejected. As he had foreseen, Prussia’s anti-same-sex legislation was adopted as Paragraph 175 of the new penal code that followed the foundation of the German Empire in 1871. Sex between men was a criminal offense throughout the empire. The implications of the law were succinctly summarized in an (anonymous) article in the first volume of Magnus Hirschfeld’s *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* (Yearbook for Sexual Intermediaries), which explained that “the German civil code adopted the wording of Paragraph 143 of the Prussian civil code for its Paragraph 175 and punished unnatural and illicit behavior with between one day and five years in prison, in addition to an optional revocation of civil rights.” John Fout has examined further how closely Paragraph 175 was implicated in the construction of a normative male subject. The above passage reinforces the exclusive gendering of such juridical same-sex discourses, since if the new law explicitly linked sexual behavior to citizenship, punishing male same-sex practices with a possible revocation of civil rights, these were, of course, also only male privileges.

Ulrichs responded to the discourses of male sexuality and the state by developing a discursive strategy that fought for the legal acceptance of men who love men by stressing the extralegal and metanational qualities of male same-sex sexuality. When he conceived of the notion of “inversion,” he engaged with classical ideas of gender, specifically, Plato’s model of male homosociality as outlined in *The Symposium*. Classical ideas of masculinity and femininity and the state, in turn, as Fout and others have shown, played an important role for nineteenth-century understandings of a communal social body. In other words, when Ulrichs theorized same-sex love as a form
of gender inversion, he was not only responding to a political discourse of the state but also partaking in the creation of a new cultural discourse about the social order that increasingly replaced the post-Enlightenment idea of the individual natural body with one of a nationally specific social body. That this national body was gendered has been convincingly argued by George Mosse, who examined the use of female symbols of the nation in the nineteenth century (including Germania, Britannia, and Marianne as personifications of the German, British, and French nations, respectively), seeing in the idealized image of the chaste woman support for the new capitalist ideologies of a patriarchal bourgeois social order.23

More recently, Alexander Maxwell, in an illuminating article on the “nationalization” of sexuality in the nineteenth century, has argued that at this moment in European national histories “female sexuality was associated with cultural or linguistic concepts of nationality, while male sexuality reflected statehood and political nationalism.”24 Maxwell examines the processes of sexual stereotyping in the Habsburg Empire, concluding that “male patriots assigned their gender the dominant role in political life and projected sexualized fantasies of longing, desire, and protection onto their nationality [while] female sexuality [was associated with] culture, language, and race.”25 Maxwell’s analysis works well for the dominant discourse of sex and state circulated by a privileged, heterosexual male elite. However, Ulrichs’s theorization of the body engaged in male same-sex behavior in preunified Germany challenges Maxwell’s neat distinction between male politics and female culture, as Ulrichs both politicized that male body in legal terms and conceptualized it as an indicator of the nation’s cultural
heritage. The coining of sexual inversion in this context exemplifies the double negation of cultural genealogy and legal status in relation to female same-sex issues. Women who had sex with other women were invisible in the cultural sphere that formed the conceptual background for Ulrichs's theorization, while female same-sex acts were not criminalized by the Prussian or German imperial penal codes, mirroring the lack of recognition of what we might call a notion of female citizenship. The lack of representation goes some way toward explaining why Ulrichs, like most of his contemporaries, treated the existence of female same-sex desire mutatis mutandis as an afterthought in his investigations of male sexuality.

**Sexology and the Female Invert**

If Ulrichs's work shows that the idea of female inversion entered the discursive sphere as a philosophical afterthought, then what did the empirical case studies of the increasingly institutionalized *scientia sexualis* make of the phenomenon? In the 1880s a shift is visible from Ulrichs’s somewhat individual sexual activism toward a more institutionalized organization of the study of sex. Foucault has argued that the emergence of sexology was indicative of what he called the project of “governmentality,” the formulation of types of knowledge utilized by the state to monitor the habits of its citizens. Foucault claimed that this development is part of the historical trajectory of the emergence of modern liberal government, where the views of professionals, especially from the medical realm, are considered representative of the needs of a nation’s social body. However, while sexology as a discipline is part of a modern biopolitics of state, the individual texts of sexology are also subject to the very
processes of cultural contingency they seek to explain on paper. To gain further insights into the larger discourses of governmentality and the sexual body, it is useful to pay attention to the textual strategies of sexology, examining the construction of sexological arguments about “female inversion” in terms of their narrative function, which in turn reveals more about their politics.

Richard von Krafft-Ebing's engagement with female same-sex sexuality in his *Psychopathia Sexualis*, one of the key works of emerging sexology, first published in 1886, illustrates the increasingly complex meanings of female inversion at the fin de siècle. Here the conceptualization of female same-sex sexuality came under more sustained scrutiny, since it served to demarcate the political concerns of different states as well as to assess from within the condition of a particular social body. Critical studies of *Psychopathia Sexualis* over the past two decades or so reflect some of the main changes in the assessments of the *scientia sexualis*, from the early view that sexology as a discipline was single-handedly instrumental in the pathologization and stigmatization of sexual desire, put forward by Faderman and others, to the more complicated analyses of sexology's cultural contingency developed by Bland, Chauncey, Duggan, and Oosterhuis, to name but a few. My investment in rereading *Psychopathia Sexualis* is tied to a reconsideration of the issues at stake for sexologists such as Krafft-Ebing.

Specifically, I want to focus on two linked aspects of Krafft-Ebing's conceptualization of female inversion: the establishment of female sexuality beyond the reproductive body and the legal treatment of same-sex practices. Little attention has been paid to the fact that Krafft-Ebing made an argument for the functionality of the female sexual body
partly in order to intervene in the legal debates surrounding Paragraph 175 and the criminalization of male same-sex sexuality. He showed some awareness of the limited gender politics of sexology, despite the fact that, like other sexologists, he considered female same-sex sexuality mostly only in relation to male sexuality. For Krafft-Ebing, the “female invert” was partly an expository device for constructing complex arguments in support of male sexuality.

Psychopathia Sexualis differs from earlier protosexological texts of criminologists such as that written by the French physician Ambroise Tardieu, who sought to identify a distinct physicality among those he classified as degenerate sexual offenders in a bid to produce applicable medical formulae that would help to establish sexual culpability within the courtroom. Krafft-Ebing was more overtly concerned with assessments of what we would now call notions of sexual identity. He claimed that “the inborn contrary sexual feeling in women,” an expression adapted from the terminology of Carl Westphal, described a range of different sexual types. Krafft-Ebing emphasized that same-sex feeling was not necessarily a form of physiological inversion, stating that “from a clinical point of view, the manifestation of the anomaly is the same in women mutatis mutandis in relation to men, including the same differentiations. Psychohermaphroditical women and many homosexual women do not show their anomaly, either physically or in terms of (masculine) sexual characteristics of the soul.” This assessment complicated Ulrichs’s notion that sexual inversion is always also a form of gender inversion, suggesting that the reversal of male and female roles as well as masculine and feminine qualities was only one of the varieties of same-sex phenomena. Indeed, Krafft-Ebing
stressed that "it cannot be emphasized enough that sexual acts between persons of the same sex are no sure indicator of sexual inversion. This only occurs if the physical and psychical secondary characteristics of a person of the same sex attract another person of the same sex and cause in him/her the impulse for sexual acts."\textsuperscript{30}

Krafft-Ebing devoted roughly two of the seven introductory pages on "congenital sexual inversion in women" in \textit{Psychopathia Sexualis} to questions of the criminalization of same-sex sexuality. The discussion hinged on establishing a renewed focus on the functionality of the female sexual body. He deliberately attempted to dispel what he considered to be the widespread misconception that "women are not capable of committing illegal sexual acts with other women."\textsuperscript{31} He insisted that women who have sex with other women are physiologically able to produce "orgasm, including ejaculation by means of a sexual act, and hence sexual satisfaction," attributing the same level of sexual functionality to the female body as was typically reserved for the male body.\textsuperscript{32} Sheila Jeffreys has infamously accused Krafft-Ebing of inventing "a form of ejaculation in women [as no more than a sort of] contemporary men's pornography."\textsuperscript{33} Jeffreys does not provide a reference for her assertion but seems to refer to the above passage. While she might validly object to Krafft-Ebing's choice of the word "ejaculation," she also denies that some women experience an expulsion of fluid during orgasm. More importantly, Jeffreys fails to put the comment into the context of the legal debates evoked by Krafft-Ebing. What is at stake for him here was not a pathologization of female sexuality but the legal recognition of same-sex practices between women as well as between men.
Granting to the female body the same sexual function as to the male body enabled Krafft-Ebing to construct an admittedly rather convoluted argument for the decriminalization of sex between men. Mirroring the discursive strategies of those male same-sex activists who sought validation for their desire by constructing a historic lineage of same-sex sexuality going back to the classical tradition, Krafft-Ebing first of all suggested that there exists a history of female same-sex sexuality, claiming that “sexual intercourse between women occurs throughout history.” This assertion provided the necessary evidence for him that the recent German legislation “created and handles Paragraph 175 on the basis of contradictory, naive and erroneous suppositions,” precisely because it ignored the existence of female same-sex sexuality when formulating the law. He then went on to contrast German and Austrian law (he was working as professor of psychiatry at the University of Vienna when he wrote Psychopathia Sexualis). Krafft-Ebing argued that, unlike Paragraph 175, “Austria’s legislation seems more coherent, as it criminalizes these acts between women too.” Crucially, he emphasized that there had been no convictions of women under Austria’s law, attributing this to the fact that “public opinion in Austria evidently considers sexual acts between women only as acts against morality, not against the law.” The distinction between male same-sex transgressions against the state, punished with imprisonment, and female same-sex acts, considered moral failures and so escaping legal punishment, accords with the lack of recognition of female citizenship in the nineteenth century. Here the female sexual body is subsumed into an extrainstitutional ethical discourse regulated directly by “public opinion.”
Krafft-Ebing’s observations on the criminalization of female same-sex sexuality in Austria did not lead him to argue for the criminalization of female same-sex practices in Germany. *Psychopathia Sexualis* does not develop the argument, but Krafft-Ebing subsequently elaborated on the point of female same-sex sexuality and the law in an article written toward the end of his life and published by Hirschfeld. Here he returned to the issue of the functional female sexual body, observing that “woman too, if her erogenous zones are sufficiently stimulated, generates a process that is analogous to male ejaculation, which makes the act that caused it equivalent to coitus.” He staked a claim for the similarity of the female and the male sexual body, returning to the unequal legal treatment of male and female sexual inversion and concluding that, as both male and female inversion are natural phenomena, to make the law fair it would be appropriate to decriminalize male homosexuality rather than to criminalize the female equivalent. Faderman dismisses this development of Krafft-Ebing’s views, suggesting that the article in Hirschfeld’s journal would have had little impact on a wider readership. It is worth noting that Krafft-Ebing first made this appeal in a revised German version of *Psychopathia Sexualis* that was not translated into English during Krafft-Ebing’s lifetime.

*Psychopathia Sexualis* had two main translators into English. In 1892 the American psychiatrist Charles Gilbert Chaddock provided the first translation of the seventh German edition, which did not yet include Krafft-Ebing’s observations on female inversion and the law. Chaddock’s translation was published in the United States only,
and, according to a letter from the British sexologist Havelock Ellis to his collaborator John Addington Symonds, it had only a limited circulation in Britain. The first English translation available in Britain was produced in 1899 by the Englishman Francis Joseph Rebman, who translated the tenth German edition. In 1902 Rebman translated the twelfth and final edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, which included Krafft-Ebing’s discussion of the legality of female same-sex practices. It was read widely in British medical and intellectual circles, as contemporary letters and journal entries attest. I have discussed elsewhere how Rebman anglicized *Psychopathia Sexualis* in line with fin-de-siècle British concerns, for instance, by translating Krafft-Ebing’s use of the German word *Nation* as “empire.” However, these changes operated on a relatively small semantic scale, and I have argued that they are manifestations of a larger cultural unconscious rather than deliberate interventions of the translator. The case is different in relation to female inversion, for here Rebman cut more than five pages of Krafft-Ebing’s text. Rebman’s only reference to Krafft-Ebing’s ideas on female same-sex sexuality and the law is a single sentence that states: “The chief reason why inverted sexuality in women is still covered with the veil of mystery is that the homosexual act so far as woman is concerned, does not fall under the law.” Rebman’s omission of the remaining discussion suggests that he deliberately tailored his translation to suit his national readership, avoiding concerns unfamiliar to a contemporary English public that associated the legal aspects of same-sex sexuality with the trial of Oscar Wilde in 1895. One might wonder why, if national relevance was Rebman’s overriding concern, he did not simply remove all references to legislation about same-sex practices. Rebman’s inclusion of a short sentence summarizing Krafft-Ebing’s observation on female
sexuality and the law ensured that two of the more conservative premises of Krafft-Ebing’s analysis were maintained: first, it preserved Krafft-Ebing’s link between the sexual and the social body; and second, it specifically supported the premise, shared by most sexologists, that female sexuality could always be considered primarily in relation to male sexuality. Taking Krafft-Ebing’s sentence out of its context, Rebman’s translation distorts the reasons why Krafft-Ebing linked female same-sex practices to the law. It helps to explain why Krafft-Ebing’s own interventions in existing debates have remained obscured and also the extent to which they went beyond the textual realm. In 1899, for example, he joined a campaign led by Hirschfeld and signed a petition presented to the German Reichstag to obtain the revocation of Paragraph 175.41

Examining Krafft-Ebing’s views on female sexual inversion and the politics of their translation, then, makes tangible the complex gender politics of sexology and its cultural specificity. While female same-sex sexuality was marginalized by omission in Rebman’s translation, Krafft-Ebing’s own views were more complex and tied to larger disciplinary questions regarding the institution of a scientia sexualis. He specifically addressed the underrepresentation of women in sexology and the insufficient empirical material available, writing that “details will come into our knowledge only when medical women enter into the study of this subject.”42 This viewpoint does not mean that Krafft-Ebing’s politics were part of the progressive same-sex and feminist activism of the later nineteenth century. However, his engagement with female inversion reveals that what was at stake for him was not the invention of the female sexual body but its recognition, and this in turn was linked to the relationship between sexology and the legislation of
the male subject by the state.

**Feminist Inverts and the Marginalization of Female Same-Sex Desire**

How did women themselves contribute to the theorization of sex within the emergence of sexology? Critics have shown that within a German context female same-sex discourses by women gained greater recognition in the first decade of the twentieth century, when a number of literary, political, and legal debates were written on the subject. In 1901 *Psychopathia Sexualis* made an early appearance in the affirmative female same-sex novel *Sind es Frauen? Roman über das dritte Geschlecht* (Are They Women? A Novel about the Third Sex), published by the writer and journalist Minna Wettstein-Adelt under the pseudonym Aimée Duc. The work charts the loves and lives of a group of university women who talk explicitly about their love for women and cheerfully refer to themselves as the “Krafft-Ebing people.”

Claudia Breger, investigating discourses of “female inversion” from this period, claims that her own queer “methodological plea for an investigation of incoherence” is prefigured in Duc’s novel. Breger suggests that the identities of the characters within the novel are represented in fluid terms of “feminine masculinities/masculine femininities” in a deliberate bid to trouble the narrow sexological classifications of sex and gender.

While I am not convinced that Breger’s presentist labeling is in itself helpful for understanding the specific historic meanings of “sexual inversion,” her article usefully indicates that the discourses of sexology need to be understood in relation to larger, less readily definable cultural discourses of sex such as women’s fictional writings, which made a substantial contribution to the emergence of modern sexual discourses.
That the voices of women such as Duc who intervened directly in same-sex debates still remained exceptional has been reinforced by Christine Leidinger’s reexamination of the political activism of “Anna Rüling.” In 1904 Rüling, a journalist whose real name was Theodora Anna Sprüngli, gave the first known German public speech on the relationship between organized feminism and homosexuality. Leidinger reveals that while Rüling’s speech had some impact on the radical reformers of her time, her same-sex activism was gradually subsumed into the wider nationalistic, militaristic, and colonial turn in contemporary German politics. State politics also played some role in the renewed legal interest in same-sex sexuality, which, as Tracie Matysik reveals, led in 1909 to a proposal to replace Paragraph 175 with a new law that would have criminalized sex between women as well as between men. The start of World War I brought an end to these debates. However, Matysik convincingly argues that these debates reveal much about the broader pattern of marginalizing female same-sex sexuality, which “tended to turn attention away from the female homosexual and toward either the homosexual man or the heterosexual woman, categories that were themselves in transition at the turn of the century due to the efforts of the homosexual rights movement and the women’s rights campaign.”

The German contexts offer some new conceptual tools for reassessing the British discourses on female inversion. As previously mentioned, modern scholarly studies of female inversion tend to focus on the interwar period, often developed around assessments of Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness*, published in 1928. Hall’s
protagonist, Stephen Gordon, who is herself well versed in the writings of Ulrichs and Krafft-Ebing, certainly provides the most recognizable self-identified female invert in English literary history, and the novel’s subsequent appearance in early-twentieth-century sexology clearly indicates some of the complex interactions between sexological and literary spheres. It tells us less, however, about the cultural discourses of inversion at the time of production of the early sexological texts, which coincided with the emergence of the so-called New Woman in Britain, a type of increasingly outspoken feminist who demanded--and gained--rights such as education that had hitherto been the preserve of men. Critics have analyzed how antifeminist responses to the phenomenon typically caricatured the New Woman as “inverted” because she was seen to follow mannish pursuits such as trouser wearing, pipe smoking, and book reading. What has received less attention is that women themselves embraced this image of female masculinity. I want to conclude, then, with a brief examination of female inversion as an affirmative part of a new feminist politics. I argue that New Women understood gender in terms of binaries that could be reversed but that their affirmative politics of female inversion, because it was understood as a form of rational female masculinity, marginalized same-sex desire.

Recognizing the existence of a “feminist invert” enables a new understanding of how women theorized sex and gender beyond scientific taxonomies. It also provides a corrective to those critical studies that refuse to accept that women in the late nineteenth century made affirmative use of a notion of masculinity. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s influential article “Discourses of Sexuality and Subjectivity: The New
Woman, 1870-1936,” which suggests that the legacy of New Woman feminism ended in the 1920s when feminists adopted the sexological vocabulary, is typical of modern critical responses to the links between early feminism and the scientia sexualis. Smith-Rosenberg argues that the feminists of the early twentieth century embraced “the sexual rhetoric of male physicians, sex reformers, politicians, and novelists. This rhetoric represented the New Women as social and sexual hermaphrodites, as an ‘intermediate sex’ that existed between and thus outside of the biological and social order.”51 For Smith-Rosenberg the feminists of the 1920s were unsuccessful precisely because they made use of a discursive strategy--female inversion--that was deeply associated with antifeminist stereotypes, alienating their politics from the rhetoric of their late-nineteenth-century foremothers who, according to Smith-Rosenberg, rejected the new discourse of inversion as it emerged. In contrast, Ann Heilmann’s more recent assessment of what she calls the “New Woman strategies” has shown that in the early twentieth century feminist writers such as Mona Caird deliberately “breathe[d] new life into the late Victorian cliché of the mannish New Woman” to formulate their feminist stance. Heilmann suggests that Caird in her novels, for instance, The Stones of Sacrifice, published in 1915, reappropriated the mannish New Woman in positive terms, while “at the same time she advertises to her Edwardian readers, who by 1915 would have been familiar with New Woman discourses, that [she] is not a cliché but the real thing [whose] ‘virile force’ and flamboyant advocacy of personal rights at all costs empower herself and others.”52

For New Woman feminists such as Caird, notions of inversion served primarily as a
strategic tool for challenging the existing gender order. Inversion was largely associated with the intellectual rather than the sexual, as women argued for intellectual recognition in terms of a rational female masculinity. One of the earliest examples of New Woman writing, Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*, published in 1883, shows that there also already existed some awareness of the association of inversion with nonnormative sexual desire. Most analyses of *The Story of an African Farm*, fêted by Edith Ellis as the “forerunner of the Woman’s movement,” focus on the feminist politics of the novel’s protagonist, Lyndall, who deliberately seeks to dissociate the female condition from the body by arguing for the rational female mind. There is little space made in the novel for an exploration of Lyndall’s sexual desires, and, indeed, heterosexual sex is portrayed in bleak terms. After a brief affair with a mysterious stranger whom she refuses to marry, Lyndall disappears from her home farm and is eventually traced to an isolated hotel, where she lies dying, having given birth to a child who lived for only three hours and about whom she claims, “I did not love it; its father was not my prince.”

However, an unusual representation of a cross-dressing “new man,” Gregory Rose, allows for a rare moment of desire within a text that is largely concerned with the realm of reason. While cross-dressing is, of course, a popular metaphor for inversion found in much New Woman fiction, where female heroines such as Angelica in Sarah Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins*, published in 1893, employ a male guise to go beyond the confines of traditional femininity, male cross-dressers are more elusive. Here Gregory, whose love for Lyndall had been rejected, traces her to the isolated hotel and in female guise nurses
her on her deathbed. Their relationship during his “womanhood” is marked in terms of touch, as Gregory “covered [Lyndall’s foot] with kisses,” and “very softly Gregory’s hands disrobed her.” Heilmann argues that Gregory’s cross-dressing plays a crucial role in Schreiner’s deconstruction of a female biology of motherhood. While Schreiner’s novel is indeed partly a critique of how closely the female condition is bound up with motherhood, I would argue that Gregory’s inversion also indicates Schreiner’s awareness of the links between sex, gender, and sexual desire. For in the tender queer touch between the nurse and her ward, Schreiner demonstrates that while inversion was for her mostly a strategic tool for critiquing issues of gender, she showed some awareness of the concept’s associations with desire.

Conclusion

Tracing the meanings and usages of female inversion at the fin de siècle provides new insights into the gendered links between the theorization of the sexual body and the conceptualization of a larger social body in the nineteenth century. More specifically, this kind of investigation enables a conceptual shift in our approach to the history of sexuality. Moving from the teleologies of modern sexual identity to the historical and cultural epistemologies of sexual theory reveals that while women had little agency in the scientia sexualis, where they were marginalized in discourses of citizenship, they contributed to the emergence of a sexual theory in the cultural sphere. For if late Victorian feminist sexual debates were not explicitly about giving voice to the female same-sex subject, feminists nevertheless engaged with concepts that are now primarily associated with the sexological realm. While the notion of sexual inversion played an
important role in the formation of the *scientia sexualis*, the existence of a feminist female invert prior to the emergence of a self-professed, sexologically defined female invert reinforces the idea that theorizing sex was part of a much broader Western cultural tradition. In the literature of those late-nineteenth-century writers and activists organizing a sustained political debate about the “woman question” such as Olive Schreiner and Mona Caird, we find that women engaged with a kind of desexualized notion of inversion that focused not on sexual identity but on gender difference. These women writers understood inversion broadly in terms of a rational female masculinity that might be visible through dress, hair, and other physical markers of gender but that primarily described the reversal of gender stereotypes. Claiming male prerogatives such as education and work as well as trouser wearing, New Women writers engaged with a notion of female inversion specifically to challenge the current condition of a perceived inferior womanhood, seeking to lay bare the sociocultural processes that produced restrictive conventions of femininity. Methodologically, these feminist engagements with female inversion form a kind of reverse discourse initiated by women who understood the notion not in terms of sexual identity but as the process of producing and refuting sex-gender binaries. This larger cultural discourse, while affirmative in terms of the female sexual body, marginalized female same-sex desire.

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NOTES


6 Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, 257.


10 Halberstam, Female Masculinity, 46.

11 Ibid., 77.


16 Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Prometheus: Forschungen über das Räthsel der mannmännlichen Liebe (Leipzig: Gerbe’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1870). Hubert Kennedy has republished the twelve volumes as Forschungen über das Räthsel der mannmännlichen Liebe, ed. Hubert Kennedy (Berlin: Rosa Winkel, 1994).


18 Ibid., 8.

19 Ibid., 4.


23 George L. Mosse, Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

25 Ibid., 290.


29 Ibid., 301.

30 Ibid., 299.

31 Ibid., 298.

32 Ibid.


35 Ibid., 298.


38 Havelock Ellis to John Addington Symonds, 9 February 1893, MS DM109, 1882-93, Bristol University Library.


44 Breger, “Feminine Masculinities,” 82.


Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle, ed. Sally Ledger and Scott Mc Cracken (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 45–65; McClintock, Imperial Leather, 258-95.


56 Schreiner, The Story of an African Farm, 248, 250.

57 Heilmann, New Woman Strategies, 143.