

## Introduction

### 'New' Female Sexualities, 1870–1930

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In her study of the relationship between sex, gender, and social change in Britain since 1880, Lesley Hall justifies her starting date by pointing out that 'recent historians of the nineteenth century have perceived a definite change in sexual attitudes, and in ways of talking about and dealing with sexual issues, around 1880'.<sup>1</sup> She suggests that this marks the beginnings of 'certain ways of thinking about sex which are essentially "modern"'. This special edition, which focuses on readings of texts published from the 1870s to the late 1920s, examines these 'modern' ways of conceptualising sex in relation to the dangerous figure of the sexually active woman and to female sexuality in general. It takes its impetus from such recent developments in the historicizing of sexuality that have designated the fin de siècle and early twentieth century as particularly important for understanding the early formation of 'new' female sexual identities. At this time the new science of sexology, the development of psychoanalysis, the social purity movement, the rise of the New Woman and the proliferation of more sexually explicit texts all contributed to increased public debates about the nature of female sexuality. As Frank Mort has argued, this was a period when social purists and feminists increasingly felt compelled to 'speak out about sex' and 'to confront the conspiracy of silence and shame which surrounded the subject',<sup>2</sup> a confrontation which also took place in New Woman fiction. Similarly, the writings and lectures of key figures such as Sigmund Freud, Havelock Ellis, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing 'had begun to categorize different sexual behaviours and identities',<sup>3</sup> their comments on both heterosexuality and inversion having far-reaching ramifications on literary texts published in this period. Representations of same-sex desire between women often relied on these sexological and scientific ways of thinking about female sexuality.



Contributors focus on key aspects of debates over female sexuality, examining free love, prostitution, adultery, lesbianism, maternity, sadism, and the need for female sexual pleasure. Following Foucault's emphasis on sex as a discursive construct, they contextualise their readings of literary texts by drawing on a range of contemporary discourses, including feminist and anti-feminist writings, medical material, scientific texts, and visual images. The articles explore both representations of female desire and sexual practice and ways of regulating female sexuality. Mort has noted that around 1880 we can see 'the beginnings of a discourse on active female sexuality'<sup>4</sup> that is to develop into the twentieth century, but this discourse encounters many oppositions, particularly in the form of censorship. Although writers were gradually being allowed more freedom to represent sexual practices and desires, material felt to be sexually explicit or immoral was still censored; discussion of some of the 'scandalous' texts withheld from the public helps to establish which aspects of female sexuality were perceived to be most shocking. The struggle to maintain or define sexual identity given such restrictions is noted by most of the contributors, who map out the difficulties involved for women in 'claim[ing] a positive sexualised identity'.<sup>5</sup> Different views emerge, however, about male writers' representations of women's sexual identities, with some seeing male-authored texts as perpetuating damaging sexual stereotypes and others arguing for men's more enlightened views.

The first two articles focus on same-sex desire between women and the articulation of what we now refer to as lesbian identity, though the contributors make varied use of sexological and psychoanalytic material. In Angelica Michelis's article, she provides a Kleinian reading of Sheridan Le Fanu's vampire novella, *Carmilla* (1872), showing the limitations of Freudian interpretations of female sexuality and the relevance of Melanie Klein's theories about maternity and the maternal body. She argues that the female vampire is threatening because of its exposure of the horrors of the female reproductive body. In contrast, Heike Bauer's reading of the lesbian classic, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) is very much informed by sexological theories of inversion, particularly the work of Krafft-Ebing, which, she claims, was a direct influence on Hall. She also draws on Judith Halberstam's work on 'female masculinity' to account for the novel's daring representations of Stephen's inversion, suggesting that Hall's knowledge of new sexological ideas lead



her to show how various forms of sexual desire can exist within one sexual preference.

Feminist debates about the New Woman and the prostitute form the basis for two of the other articles, which examine representations of sexually active women in fiction and drama from the mid-1880s to the 1910s. Both draw on contemporary feminist and medical discourses, as well as debates about sexuality in the periodical press. My article considers the representation of prostitution in the climate of social purity in three late-Victorian texts: George Gissing's *The Unclassed* (1884), Annie Holdsworth's New Woman novel, *Joanna Traill, Spinster* (1894) and George Bernard Shaw's play, *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1894). By underlining the economic causes of prostitution, the texts reinforce the dangers of working-class female sexuality and the need for its regulation, showing how the philanthropic project of reclaiming fallen women was linked to the repression of the New Woman. I argue that Shaw's play, which was banned, is more radical in its valorisation of brothels and demythologisation of contemporary images of the prostitute. In her article on novels by 'Old Men', however, Ann Heilmann argues that male writers generally used New Woman fiction as a vehicle for anti-feminist thought, in order to neutralize their anxieties about masculinity. Writers such as Walter Besant, Grant Allen, and H.G. Wells focussed on free love only in order to mobilize their fantasies of female submission. Rather than inadvertently endorsing active female sexuality like the representations of prostitution, these reflections on free love effectively repositioned women within the traditional parameters of the male-dominated heterosexual unit of reproduction.

The sexually explicit nature of the erotic fiction considered in the final two articles allows for less prurient representations of sexually active women, though perhaps inevitably they also reproduce some of the sexual stereotypes validated in less sensational texts. Chris White considers representations of sadism, masochism and female sexual submission in 1890s' erotica, drawing on definitions of sexual violence from De Sade and Krafft-Ebing to contemporary theorists. She is particularly interested in forms of erotic power play in the texts, and the experience of female humiliation or submission, showing how the 'shame' produced by taboo sexual acts such as rape and incest can also be interpreted as the experience of female sexual pleasure, with the texts celebrating unfettered sexual freedom for women. Nickianne Moody also analyses female sexual pleasure in her reading of the

fiction of Elinor Glyn, whose notorious erotic novel *Three Weeks* (1907) centred on the seduction of a young man by an older, sexually experienced and married femme fatale. She shows how representations of adulterous women and female sexual desire were initially perceived to be too scandalous to be filmed in the 1920s, though Glyn's invention of 'it', the sex appeal of the screen flapper, was to become a trademark of Hollywood cinema later in the century.

The diversity of these articles then testifies to the wide-ranging nature of debates about female sexuality in this period. Literary texts made an important contribution to 'new' definitions and conceptualisations of female sexuality, informed by writers' knowledge of cultural commentaries on such topical issues as adultery, prostitution, free love, incest, and inversion. It is fascinating to see the crossovers between representations of sexually active women in texts with very different agendas, as these writers often drew on a common set of fears and fantasies about female sexuality. The following articles demonstrate the difficulties of putting new sexual identities into discourse and the relentless struggle against censorship this often involved, but they also sometimes celebrate the pleasures of these scandalous texts.

## Notes

1. Lesley Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain since 1880* (Houndsmill: Macmillan, 2000), 1.

2. Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-moral politics in England since 1830* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000 [1987]), 89.

3. Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English feminism and sexual morality, 1885–1914* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), 307.

4. *Dangerous Sexualities*, 91.

5. *Banishing the Beast*, 307.