



## **The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman**

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# The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman

Esther Newton

I hate games! I hate role-playing! It's so ludicrous that certain lesbians, who despise men, become the exact replicas of them! [Anonymous interview in *The Gay Report*, ed. Karla Jay and Allen Young]

Because the proposition that lesbianism is an intensified form of female bonding has become a belief, thinking, acting, or looking like a man contradicts lesbian feminism's first principle: the lesbian is a "woman-

This essay grew out of an earlier one called "The Mythic Lesbian and the New Woman: Power, Sexuality and Legitimacy," written with Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and presented by us at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Vassar College, June 16, 1981. A revised version of that paper has appeared in French under the title "Le Mythe de la lesbienne et la femme nouvelle," in *Strategies des femmes* (Paris: Éditions Tierce, 1984). The French collection is forthcoming in English from Indiana University Press. Smith-Rosenberg's further use of this material will appear as chap. 9, "The New Woman and the Mannish Lesbian: Gender Disorder and Social Control," in her book *The New Woman and the Troubled Man* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., in press). Developing the Radclyffe Hall material independently, I drew conclusions that do not represent Smith-Rosenberg's thinking and for which she is in no way responsible. But we worked jointly for two years, and I am in her debt for all I learned from her as historian and for her unflagging support. I am also indebted to the members of the Purchase women's studies seminar, particularly Mary Edwards, Suzanne Kessler, and Louise Yellin, who read drafts and made helpful suggestions, as did David M. Schneider, Carole Vance, Wendy McKenna, and especially Amber Hollibaugh. I thank the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York, where I did early research, and Jan Boney for technical help. And for another kind of insight and support, without which this paper might never have been written, I thank the women of the B. group.

identified woman.”<sup>1</sup> What to do, then, with that figure referred to, in various times and circumstances, as the “mannish lesbian,” the “true invert,” the “bull dagger,” or the “butch”? You see her in old photographs or paintings with legs solidly planted, wearing a top hat and a man’s jacket, staring defiantly out of the frame, her hair slicked back or clipped over her ears; or you meet her on the street in T-shirt and boots, squiring a brassily elegant woman on one tattooed arm. She is an embarrassment indeed to a political movement that swears it is the enemy of traditional gender categories and yet validates lesbianism as the ultimate form of femaleness.

Out of sight, out of mind! “Butch and femme are gone,” declares one lesbian author, with more hope than truth.<sup>2</sup> But what about those old photographs? Was the mannish lesbian a myth created by “the [male] pornographic mind”<sup>3</sup> or by male sexologists intent on labeling nineteenth-century feminists as deviant? Maybe the old photographs portray a few misguided souls—or perhaps those “premovement” women thought men’s ties were pretty and practical?

In the nineteenth century and before, individual women passed as men by dressing and acting like them for a variety of economic, sexual, and adventure-seeking reasons. Many of these women were from the working class.<sup>4</sup> Public, *partial* cross-dressing among bourgeois women was a late nineteenth-century development. Earlier isolated instances of partial cross-dressing seem to have been associated with explicit feminism (e.g., French writer George Sand and American physician Mary Walker), although most nineteenth-century feminists wore traditional women’s clothing. From the last years of the century, cross-dressing was increasingly associated with “sexual inversion” by the medical profession. Did the doctors invent or merely describe the mannish lesbian? Either way, what did this mythic figure signify, and to whom? In addressing

1. Two key texts are Radicalesbians, “The Woman Identified Woman,” reprinted in *Radical Feminism*, ed. Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone (New York: Quadrangle, 1973), pp. 240–45; and Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 631–60. The best analysis of how these ideas have evolved and of their negative consequences for the feminist movement is Alice Echols, “The New Feminism of Yin and Yang,” in *Powers of Desire*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), pp. 439–59.

2. Sasha Gregory Lewis, *Sunday’s Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), p. 42.

3. Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture’s Revenge against Nature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 219.

4. On passing women, see San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project, “*She Even Chewed Tobacco*”: *Passing Women in Nineteenth-Century America* (1983), slide-tape distributed by Iris Films, Box 5353, Berkeley, California 94705; Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976), pp. 209–80.

these questions, my paper explores and speculates on the historical relationships between lesbianism, feminism, and gender.

One of the central figures in this debate is British author Radclyffe Hall (1880–1943). Without question, the most infamous mannish lesbian, Stephen Gordon, protagonist of *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), was created not by a male pornographer, sexologist, legislator, or novelist but by Hall, herself an “out” and militantly tie-wearing lesbian. And *The Well*, at least until 1970, was *the* lesbian novel.<sup>5</sup> Why is it that *The Well* became famous rather than all the others? Why does this novel make so many lesbian feminists and their allies squirm?<sup>6</sup>

Unable to wish Radclyffe Hall away, sometimes even hoping to reclaim her, our feminist scholars have lectured, excused, or patronized her. Radclyffe Hall, they declare, was an unwitting dupe of the misogynist doctors’ attack on feminist romantic friendships. Or, cursed with a pessimistic temperament and brainwashed by Catholicism, Hall parroted society’s condemnation of lesbians. The “real” Radclyffe Hall lesbian novel, this argument frequently continues, the one that *ought* to have been famous, is her first, *The Unlit Lamp* (1924). Better yet, Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928) should have been the definitive lesbian novel. Or Natalie Barney’s work, or anything but *The Well*.<sup>7</sup>

5. “Most of us lesbians in the 1950s grew up knowing nothing about lesbianism except Stephen Gordon’s swagger,” admits Blanche Wiesen Cook, herself a critic of Hall; see Cook’s “‘Women Alone Stir My Imagination’: Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition,” *Signs* 4, no. 4 (Summer 1979): 719–20. Despite Stephen Gordon’s aristocratic trappings, her appeal transcended geographic and class barriers. We know that *The Well* was read early on by American lesbians of all classes (personal communication with Liz Kennedy from the Buffalo Oral History Project [1982]; and see Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, “Lesbianism in the 1920s and 1930s: A Newfound Study,” *Signs* 2, no. 4 [Summer 1977]: 895–904, esp. 897). *The Well* has been translated into numerous languages. According to Una Troubridge, in the 1960s it was still steadily selling over a hundred thousand copies a year in America alone; Troubridge was still receiving letters of appreciation addressed to Hall almost twenty years after Hall’s death (Una Troubridge, *The Life and Death of Radclyffe Hall* [London: Hammond, Hammond & Co., 1961]). Even today, it sells as much as or more than any other lesbian novel, in straight and women’s bookstores (personal communication with Amber Hollibaugh [1983], who has worked at Modern Times Bookstore [San Francisco], Djuna Books, and Womanbooks [New York City]).

6. Hall deserves censure for her possible fascist sympathies, but this is not the focus of feminist attacks on her. In any case, such sympathies developed after she wrote *The Well*; see Troubridge, pp. 118–24.

7. For the anti-*Well* approach, see Cook; Lillian Faderman and Ann Williams, “Radclyffe Hall and the Lesbian Image,” *Conditions* 1, no. 1 (April 1977): 31–41; Catharine R. Stimpson, “Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English,” in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 243–60; Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1981), pp. 322–23; Vivian Gornick, “The Whole Radclyffe Hall: A Pioneer Left Behind,” *Village Voice* (June 10–16, 1981). Only Inez Martinez, whose approach is quite different from mine, defends Hall: see “The Lesbian Hero Bound: Radclyffe Hall’s Portrait of Sapphic Daughters and Their Mothers,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 8, nos. 3/4 (Spring/Summer 1983): 127–37.

Heterosexual conservatives condemn *The Well* for defending the lesbian's right to exist; lesbian feminists condemn it for presenting lesbians as different from women in general. But *The Well* has continuing meaning to lesbians because it confronts the stigma of lesbianism—as most lesbians have had to live it. Maybe Natalie Barney, with her fortune and her cast-iron ego, or safely married Virginia Woolf were able to pooh-pooh the patriarchy, but most lesbians have had to face being called or at least feeling like freaks. As the Bowery bum represents all that is most feared and despised about drunkenness, the mannish lesbian, of whom Stephen Gordon is the most famous prototype, has symbolized the stigma of lesbianism and so continues to move a broad range of lesbians.<sup>8</sup> A second reason for *The Well's* continuing impact, which I will explore briefly at the close of this paper, is that Stephen Gordon articulated a gender orientation with which an important minority of lesbians still actively identify.

By “mannish lesbian” (a term I use because it, rather than the contemporary “butch,” belongs to the time period I am studying) I mean a figure who is defined as lesbian *because* her behavior or dress (and usually both) manifest elements designated as exclusively masculine. From about 1900 on, this cross-gender figure became the public symbol of the new social/sexual category “lesbian.” Some of our feminist historians deplore the emergence of the mannish lesbian, citing her association with the medical model of pathology. For them, the nineteenth century becomes a kind of lesbian Golden Age, replete with loving, innocent feminist couples.<sup>9</sup> From the perspective of Radclyffe Hall's generation, however, nineteenth-century models may have seemed more confining than liberating. I will argue that Hall and many other feminists like her embraced, sometimes with ambivalence, the image of the mannish lesbian and the discourse of the sexologists about inversion primarily because they desperately wanted to break out of the asexual model of romantic friendship. Two questions emerge from this statement of the problem. First, why did twentieth-century women whose primary social and intimate interest was other women wish their relationships to become explicitly sexual? Second, why did the figure of the mannish lesbian play the central role in this development?

\* \* \*

8. Many lesbians' connection to the mannish lesbian was and is painful. The relation of any stigmatized group to the figure that functions as its symbol and stereotype is necessarily ambiguous. Even before lesbian feminism, many lesbians hastened to assure themselves and others that they were not “like that.” Lesbians who could pass for straight (because they were married or appeared feminine) often shunned their butch sisters. I have dealt with these concepts at length in *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); I argue that the effeminate man is the stigma bearer for gay men.

9. See esp. Faderman.

The structure and ideology of the bourgeois woman's gender-segregated world in the nineteenth century have been convincingly described.<sup>10</sup> As British and American women gained access to higher education and the professions, they did so in all-female institutions and in relationships with one another that were intense, passionate, and committed. These romantic friendships characterized the first generation of "New Women"—such as Jane Addams, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Mary Wooley—who were born in the 1850s and 1860s, educated in the 1870s and 1880s, and flourished from the 1890s through the First World War. They sought personal and economic independence by rejecting their mothers' domestic roles. The battle to be autonomous was the battle to stay single *and* to separate from the family sphere. Ironically, they turned to romantic friendships as the alternative, replicating the female world of love and commitment in the new institutional settings of colleges and settlement houses.

Whether or not these women touched each other's genitals or had orgasms together, two things seem clear: their relationships were a quasi-legitimate alternative to heterosexual marriage, and the participants did not conceive of them as sexual. Their letters generally do not use the acknowledged sexual language—medical, religious, or pornographic—of the nineteenth century. Nor do the letters exhibit shame, in an era when lust was considered dirty and gross. On the contrary, the first generation had nothing to hide because their passionate outpourings were seen as pure and ennobling.

The bourgeois woman's sexuality proper was confined to its reproductive function; the uterus was its organ. But as for lust, "the major current in Victorian sexual ideology declared that women were passionless and asexual, the passive objects of male sexual desire."<sup>11</sup> Most bourgeois women and men believed that only males and *déclassé* women were sexual. Sex was seen as phallic, by which I mean that, conceptually, sex could only occur in the presence of an imperial and imperious penis. Working women and women of color's low status as well as their participation in the public sphere deprived them of the feminine purity that protected bourgeois women from males and from deriving sexual pleasure. But what "pure" women did with each other, no matter how good it

10. See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," *Signs* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1975): 1–30; and Faderman. On the contradictions within the romantic friendship system, see Martha Vicinus, "'One Life to Stand Beside Me': Emotional Conflicts of First-Generation College Women in England," *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 3 (Fall 1982): 602–28.

11. George Chauncey, Jr., "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance," *Salmagundi*, nos. 58/59 (Fall 1982–Winter 1983), pp. 114–45, esp. 117. He has reached the same conclusion I have regarding the "necessary" masculinity of the early lesbian persona.

felt, could not be conceived as sexual within the terms of nineteenth-century romantic discourse. Insofar as first-generation feminists were called sexual deviants, it was because they used their minds at the expense of their reproductive organs.

\* \* \*

The second generation of New Women were born in the 1870s and 1880s and came of age during the opening decades of the twentieth century. This was an extraordinarily distinguished group. Among them we count critics of the family and political radicals Margaret Sanger and Crystal Eastman; women drawn to new artistic fields, such as Berenice Abbot and Isadora Duncan; and lesbian writers such as Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather, Margaret Anderson, Natalie Barney, and Radclyffe Hall. For them, autonomy from family was, if not a given, emphatically a right. Hall's first novel, *The Unlit Lamp* (1924; hereafter *The Lamp*) is a sympathetic analysis of the first generation from the perspective of the second. The novel portrays a devouring mother using the kinship claims of the female world to crush her daughter's legitimate bid for autonomy.<sup>12</sup> Hall understands that, for the first generation, economic and social separation from the family and home was the first and necessary condition of freedom.

Joan Ogden is the competent, ambitious daughter of an upper-middle-class family living in an English provincial town. Young Joan is tutored by Elizabeth Rodney, a Cambridge graduate, whose dream is to see Joan escape from Seabourne and become a doctor. But Mrs. Ogden, Joan's hypochondriac mother, wants to keep Joan with her at all costs. When Elizabeth proposes to live with Joan in Cambridge while Joan studies medicine, Mrs. Ogden frustrates their plans by appealing successfully to Joan's guilt. Joan reflects on her wish to leave her mother in first-generation language: "'Good God' she thought bitterly, 'can there be no development of individuality in this world without hurting oneself or someone else?' She clenched her fists. 'I don't care, I don't care! I've a right to my life. . . . I defy precedent'" (pp. 247–48).<sup>13</sup>

But unlike M. Carey Thomas and other successful members of the first generation who used romantic friendships as an alternative to the domestic circle, Joan fails to assert her individuality. Family ties are an "octopus" (which was the novel's original title), squeezing life from the

12. For a related approach, see Carolyn Burke, "Gertrude Stein, the Cone Sisters, and the Puzzle of Female Friendship," in Abel, ed. (n. 7 above), pp. 221–42. Gertrude Stein shared the second generation's frustration with "daughters spending a lifetime in freeing themselves from family fixations" (p. 223).

13. All page numbers cited in the text are from Radclyffe Hall, *The Unlit Lamp* (New York: Dial Press, 1981).

daughters. In contrast, romantic friendship with Elizabeth offers Joan "companionship . . . understanding . . . help in work and play . . . freedom and endeavor" (p. 245). But Mrs. Ogden prevails; Elizabeth finally gives up, marries a wealthy man she does not love, and moves to South Africa. Joan is left to care for her mother as an unpaid nurse and companion.

Hall uses the family in *The Lamp* to symbolize society, the imposition of traditional gender divisions, and the subjugation of female fulfillment to traditional bourgeois norms. The family stands for bourgeois proprieties: proper dress, stifling garden parties, provincial gossip. Colonel Ogden is a stuffy tyrant, Mrs. Ogden the homebound woman. Fearful of alternatives, uncreative and unimaginative, the mother seeks to bind her daughter to an equally banal and confining life.

Conversely, Hall uses a masculinized body and a strong, active mind to symbolize women's rejection of traditional gender divisions and bourgeois values. Joan wants to be a doctor. Her mind is swift, intelligent, her body large, strong, healthy. She and Elizabeth hike on cold winter days, talking about science and a life away from the enclosed world of Seabourne and domesticity. As an adolescent Joan had been "large-boned and tall for her age, lanky as a boy, with a pale face and short black hair" (p. 11). She reminds Elizabeth of a young "colt." After Joan loses her battle for autonomy, however, her body changes, her health deteriorates, her ability to move freely, to see clearly is impeded. At forty-three she is an old woman, given to hysteria and hypochondria: "Constantly assailed by small, annoying symptoms . . . she had grown to dread the pulling up of the blind, because her eyes felt sensitive. . . . If she read now it was novels of the lightest kind, and she really preferred magazines" (p. 268).

Hall does not strongly develop male body and clothing imagery in *The Lamp*. But in a momentous confrontation near the novel's conclusion, masculine clothing is unambiguously used to symbolize assertiveness and modernity. Second-generation women are described as "active, aggressively intelligent women, not at all self-conscious in their tailor-made clothes, not ashamed of their cropped hair; women who did things well, important things . . . smart, neatly put together women, looking like well-bred young men" (p. 284). When two such women see Joan, now faded and failed, they ridicule her old-fashioned appearance: "'Have you seen that funny old thing with the short gray hair?' . . . Wasn't she killing? Why moiré ribbon instead of a proper necktie?' . . . I believe she's what they used to call a New Woman,' said the girl in breeches, with a low laugh. 'Honey, she's a forerunner, a kind of pioneer that's got left behind. I believe she's the beginning of things like me'" (p. 284).

Though gender ambiguity is positively associated with autonomy, there is no explicit discussion of sexuality. Joan tells a male suitor, "I've never been what you'd call in love with a man in my life" (p. 302), without a



trace of embarrassment. Joan and Elizabeth's passionate relationship is described in the traditional language of sentiment, never in a language of lust. Sexuality is not the problematic issue for Joan Ogden, nor is her ambition symbolized in sexual terms. *The Lamp* is a novel about autonomy.

\* \* \*

For many women of Radclyffe Hall's generation, sexuality—for itself and as a symbol of female autonomy—became a preoccupation. These women were, after all, the “sisters” of D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce. For male novelists, sexologists, and artists rebelling against Victorian values, sexual freedom became the cutting edge of modernism. Bourgeois women like Hall had a different relation to modernist sexual freedom, for in the Victorian terms of the first generation, they had no sexual identity to express. Women of the second generation who wished to join the modernist discourse and be twentieth-century adults needed to radically reconceive themselves.

That most New Women of the first generation resented and feared such a development, I do not doubt. But many women of the second welcomed it, cautiously or with naive enthusiasm. (One has only to think of Virginia Woolf's thrilled participation in Bloomsbury to see what I mean.) They wanted not simply male professions but access to the broader world of male opportunity. They drank, they smoked, they rejected traditional feminine clothing, and lived as expatriates, sometimes with disastrous results. But if modernism and the new sex ideas entailed serious contradictions for women, many wrote daring novels and plunged into psychoanalysis and promiscuity anyway. After all, this was what the first generation had won for them—the tenuous right to try out the new ideas and participate in the great social movements of the day.

It was in the first two decades of the twentieth century in Britain, with perhaps a ten-year lag in the United States, that due to both external attack and internal fission the old feminist movement began to split along the heterosexual/homosexual divide that is ancestral to our own. If women were to develop a lustful sexuality, with whom and in what social context were they to express it? The male establishment, of course, wanted women to be lusty with men. A basic tenet of sexual modernism was that “normal” women had at least reactive heterosexual desire.<sup>14</sup> The sex reformers attacked Victorian gender segregation and promoted the new idea of companionate marriage in which both women's and men's heterosexual desires were to be satisfied.<sup>15</sup> Easier association with men

14. See Paul Robinson, *The Modernization of Sex* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 2, 3, and chap. 1.

15. Christina Simmons, “Companionate Marriage and the Lesbian Threat,” *Frontiers* 4, no. 3 (Fall 1979): 54–59.

quickly sexualized the middle-class woman, and by the 1920s the flapper style reflected the sexual ambience of working-class bars and dance halls. The flapper flirted with being "cheap" and "fast," words that had clear sexual reference.

But what about the women who did not become heterosexual, who remained stubbornly committed to intragender intimacy? A poignant example is furnished by Frances Wilder, an obscure second-generation feminist.<sup>16</sup> Wilder had inherited the orthodox first-generation views. In a 1912 letter to the radical *Freewoman*, she advocated self-restraint, denouncing the new morality for encouraging the "same degrading laxity in sex matters which is indulged in by most of the lower animals including man." She herself, aged twenty-seven, had "always practised abstinence" with no adverse effects. But just three years later she was writing desperately to homosexual radical Edward Carpenter: "I have recently read with much interest your book entitled *The Intermediate Sex* & it has lately dawned on me that I myself belong to that class & I write to ask if there is any way of 'getting in touch with others of the same temperament'" (p. 930). Wilder was aware of the price tag on the new ideas. "The world would say that a physical relationship between two of the same sex is an unspeakable crime," she admits, but gamely reasons that, because of the "economic slavery" of women, "normal sex" is "more degrading."

The New Woman's social field was opening up, becoming more complex, and potentially more lonely. Thus, along with their desire to be modern, our bourgeois lesbian ancestors had another powerful reason to embrace change. Before they could find one another, they had to become visible, at least to each other. What they needed was a new vocabulary built on the radical idea that women apart from men could have autonomous sexual feeling.

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"I just concluded that I had . . . a dash of the masculine (I have been told more than once that I have a masculine mind . . .)," Frances Wilder had confessed to Carpenter in 1915, explaining her "strong desire to caress & fondle" a female friend.<sup>17</sup> Like most important historical developments, the symbolic fusion of gender reversal and homosexuality was overdetermined. God himself had ordained gender hierarchy and heterosexuality at the Creation. The idea that men who had sex with other men were like women was not new. But in the second half of the nineteenth century, the emerging medical profession gave scientific sanction to tradition; homosexual behavior, the doctors agreed, was both

16. Ruth F. Claus, "Confronting Homosexuality: A Letter from Frances Wilder," *Signs* 2, no. 4 (Summer 1977): 928-33.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 931.

symptom and cause of male effeminacy. The masculine female invert was perhaps an analogous afterthought. Yet the mannish lesbian proved a potent persona to both the second generation of New Women and their antifeminist enemies. I think that her image came to dominate the discourse about female homosexuality, particularly in England and America, for two reasons. First, because sexual desire was not considered inherent in women, the lesbian was thought to have a trapped male soul that phallicized her and endowed her with active lust. Second, gender reversal became a powerful symbol of feminist aspirations, positive for female modernists, negative for males regardless of whether they were conservatives or modernists.<sup>18</sup>

It was Richard von Krafft-Ebing who articulated the fusion of masculinity, feminist aspirations, and lesbianism that became, and largely remains, an article of faith in Anglo-American culture.<sup>19</sup> Krafft-Ebing categorized lesbians into four increasingly deviant and masculine types.<sup>20</sup> The first category of lesbians included women who “did not betray their anomaly by external appearance or by mental [masculine] sexual characteristics.” They were, however, responsive to the approaches of women who appeared or acted more masculine. The second classification included women with a “strong preference for male garments.” These women were the female analogy of effeminate men. By the third stage “inversion” was “fully developed, the woman [assuming] a definitely masculine role.” The fourth state represented “the extreme grade of degenerative homosexuality. The woman of this type,” Krafft-Ebing explained, “possesses of the feminine qualities only the genital organs; thought, sentiment, action, even external appearance are those of the man.”<sup>21</sup> Not only was the most degenerate lesbian the most masculine, but any gender-crossing or aspiration to male privilege was probably a symptom of lesbianism. In these pathological souls, “The consciousness of being a woman and thus to be deprived of the gay college life, or to be barred out from the military career, produces painful reflections.”<sup>22</sup> In fact, lesbianism is a congenital form of lust caused by and manifested in gender reversal, as Krafft-Ebing makes clear in discussing one case:

18. Sandra Gilbert has developed this idea in the context of modernist literature in “Costumes of the Mind: Transvestism as Metaphor in Modern Literature,” in Abel, ed. (n. 7 above), pp. 193–220.

19. Chauncey argues that medical opinion began to shift from an exclusive focus on “inversion” as gender reversal to “homosexuality” as deviant sexual orientation in the 1930s. The change has had only limited effect on popular ideology.

20. A similar section on the sexologists was first developed by Smith-Rosenberg in our joint paper and has been worked out further in her forthcoming book (see unnumbered note above).

21. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, trans. Franklin S. Klaf (1886; New York: Bell Publishing Co., 1965), pp. 262–64.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 264.

"Even in her earliest childhood she preferred playing at soldiers and other boys' games; she was bold and tom-boyish and tried even to excel her little companions of the other sex. . . . [After puberty] her dreams were of a lascivious nature, only about females, with herself in the role of the man. . . . She was quite conscious of her pathological condition. Masculine features, deep voice, manly gait, without beard, small breasts; cropped her hair short and made the impression of a man in woman's clothes."<sup>23</sup>

Havelock Ellis simplified Krafft-Ebing's four-part typology.<sup>24</sup> He kept the notion of an ascending scale of inversion, beginning with women involved in "passionate friendships" in which "no congenital inversion is usually involved" and ending with the "actively inverted woman." Ellis's discussion of the former was devastating; it turned the value that first-generation feminists had placed on passionate friendships upside down. A "sexual enthusiast,"<sup>25</sup> he saw these "rudimentary sexual relationships" as more symptomatic of female sexual ignorance and repression than of spiritual values. At the same time, his inclusion of such friendships in a discussion of inversion inevitably marked them with the stigma of "abnormality."

When Ellis got to the hard-core inverts, he was confounded by his contradictory beliefs. He wanted to construct the lesbian couple on the heterosexual model, as a "man" and a woman invert. But his antifeminism and reluctance to see active lust in women committed him to fusing inversion and masculinity. What to do with the feminine invert? His solution was an awkward compromise:

A class of women to be first mentioned . . . is formed by the women to whom the actively inverted woman is most attracted. These women differ in the first place from the normal or average woman in that they are not repelled or disgusted by lover-like advances from persons of their own sex. . . . Their faces may be plain or ill-made but not seldom they possess good figures, a point which is apt to carry more weight with the inverted woman than beauty of face . . . ; they are of strongly affectionate nature . . . and *they are always womanly* [emphasis mine]. One may perhaps say that they are the pick of the women whom the average man would pass by. No doubt this is often the reason why they are open to homosexual advances, but I do not think it is the sole reason. So far as they may be said to constitute a class they seem to possess a genuine, though not precisely sexual, preference for women over men.<sup>26</sup>

23. Ibid., pp. 278–79.

24. Havelock Ellis, "Sexual Inversion in Women," *Alienist and Neurologist* 16 (1895): 141–58.

25. See Robinson (n. 14 above) for a balanced appraisal of Ellis's radicalism in sexual issues vs. his misogyny.

26. Ellis, pp. 147–48.

This extraordinary mix of fantasy, conjecture, and insight totally contradicts Ellis's insistence that "the chief characteristic of the sexually inverted woman is a certain degree of masculinity."<sup>27</sup> No mention is made of "congenital" factors in regard to this "womanly" invert, and like most examples that do not fit pet paradigms, she is dropped. Gender reversal is not always homosexual, Ellis contends, exempting certain "mannish women" who wear men's clothes out of pragmatic motives, but the "actively inverted woman" always has "a more or less distinct trace of masculinity" as "part of an organic instinct."<sup>28</sup> Because of her firm muscles, athletic ability, dislike of feminine occupations, and predilection for male garments, "because the wearer feels more at home in them," the sexually inverted woman, people feel, "ought to have been a man."<sup>29</sup>

Thus the true invert was a being between categories, neither man nor woman, a "third sex" or "trapped soul." Krafft-Ebing, Ellis, and Freud all associated this figure with female lust and with feminist revolt against traditional roles; they were at best ambivalent, at worst horrified, by both.<sup>30</sup> But some second-generation feminists, such as Frances Wilder, Gertrude Stein, and Vita Sackville-West, associated themselves with important aspects of the "third sex" persona. None did so as unconditionally and—this must be said—as bravely as Radclyffe Hall did by making the despised mannish lesbian the hero of *The Well of Loneliness*, which she defended publicly against the British government. Hall's creation, Stephen Gordon, is a double symbol, standing for the New Woman's painful position between traditional political and social categories, and for the lesbian struggle to define and assert an identity.

In *The Well*, Stephen Gordon's parents want a son; when a daughter is born her father names her Stephen and permits her much of the freedom boys enjoy. She grows up resembling her father physically and emotionally, despising feminine pursuits and clothing. In her late teens she rejects a sympathetic male suitor because she has no sexual feeling for him. At twenty she develops a passion for a neighbor's wife, who ultimately betrays Stephen to save her own reputation. In the aftermath, Stephen's mother forces Stephen to leave Morton, the family estate, and Stephen discovers, by reading Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* in her dead father's library, that she is an "invert," an identity she instantly but painfully accepts.

27. Ibid., p. 152.

28. Ibid., p. 148.

29. Ibid., p. 153.

30. Freud's analysis was by far the most sophisticated. He rejected the trapped-soul paradigm and distinguished between "choice of object" and "sexual characteristics and sexual attitude of the subject." However, his insights were distorted by his antifeminism and his acceptance of a biological base for gender. See esp. "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman," in *Freud: Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963), pp. 133–59.

During World War I, Stephen works in an ambulance unit and falls in love with Mary, who is young, innocent, and "normal." On holiday together after the armistice, Stephen is tormented by moral scruples. Hesitant to lure Mary into an outcast life and fearful of rejection, she struggles to remain chaste. But Mary, "no coward and no weakling," forces a confrontation; they become lovers, abandoning themselves to "what can be the most relentless of human emotions," passionate sexual love (p. 312).<sup>31</sup> But life in Paris, where they make a home, becomes increasingly problematic. Stephen's absorption in her writing leaves Mary bored and unhappy. Both hate being excluded from bourgeois heterosexual society. Finally, to release Mary, Stephen pretends to have an affair; Mary reluctantly leaves with Stephen's old suitor, Martin, and Stephen is left alone.

Both *The Lamp* and *The Well* deal with autonomy, power, and legitimacy. In *The Lamp*, the family traps first-generation New Women. But in *The Well*, the female body itself becomes the nemesis of the second generation. Accordingly, the relative importance and resonance of these symbols shift from one novel to the next. In *The Lamp*, the family is realistically drawn and personified in Joan's mother, Mrs. Ogden, who dominates the novel. The family is female, retentive, and destructive. Mrs. Ogden stands for the guilt, respectability, and subjugation of individuality that destroy Joan.

Stephen Gordon must also leave the family to realize herself. But here, the family is aristocratic and romanticized. Instead of crushing Stephen in its embrace, it denies her patriarchal legitimacy solely because she is born female. Though her father gives her his looks, his intelligence, his money, and a boy's name, tragically, she cannot be his true heir. As heroic female, she is inherently illegitimate, only at home in the pages of Krafft-Ebing. Stephen's mother Lady Anna, like Mrs. Ogden, restricts individuality. But the mother is no longer the chief antagonist—the female body is. In *The Lamp*, mother and daughter war over issues of self-fulfillment; in *The Well*, over issues of gender and, ultimately, sexuality.

Even newborn, Stephen's body is mythically masculine: "Narrow-hipped and wide shouldered" (p. 13). She grows and her body becomes "splendid," "supple," "quick"; she can "fence like a man"; she discovers "her body for a thing to be cherished . . . since its strength could rejoice her" (p. 58). But as she matures, her delight degenerates into angst. She is denied male privilege, of course, in spite of her masculine body. But her physical self is also fleshly symbol of the femininity Stephen categorically rejects. Her body is not and cannot be male; yet it is not traditionally female. Between genders and thus illegitimate, it represents Every New

31. All page numbers cited in the text are from Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (New York: Pocket Books, 1950).

Woman, stifled after World War I by a changed political climate and reinforced gender stereotypes. But Hall also uses a body between genders to symbolize the “inverted” sexuality Stephen can neither disavow nor satisfy. Finding herself “no match” for a male rival, the adolescent Stephen begins to hate herself. In one of Hall’s most moving passages Stephen expresses this hatred as alienation from her body:

That night she stared at herself in the glass; and even as she did so, she hated her body with its muscular shoulders, its small compact breasts, and its slender flanks of an athlete. All her life she must drag this body of hers like a monstrous fetter imposed on her spirit. This strangely ardent yet sterile body. . . . She longed to maim it, for it made her feel cruel: it was so white, so strong and so self-sufficient; yet withal so poor and unhappy a thing that her eyes filled with tears and her hate turned to pity. She began to grieve over it, touching her breasts with pitiful fingers, stroking her shoulders, letting her hands slip along her straight thighs—Oh, poor and most desolate body! [P. 187]

Stephen’s difference from Joan Ogden, her overt sexuality, is also represented by cross-dressing. But if male writers used cross-dressing to symbolize and castigate a world upside down, while Virginia Woolf and other female modernists used it to express “gleeful skepticism” toward gender categories,<sup>32</sup> Stephen’s cross-dressing asserts a series of agonizing estrangements. Stephen is alienated from Lady Anna as the New Woman often was from her own mother, as the lesbian was, increasingly, from heterosexual women. Unlike Orlando, Stephen is trapped in history; she cannot declare gender an irrelevant game. She, like many young women then and now, alternately rebels against her mother’s vision of womanhood and blames herself for her failure to live up to it. Preferring suits from her father’s tailor, she sometimes gives in to her mother’s demand that she wear “delicate dresses,” which she puts on “all wrong.” Her mother confirms Stephen’s sense of freakishness: “It’s my face,” Stephen announces, “something’s wrong with my face.” “Nonsense!” her mother replies, “turning away quickly to hide her expression” (p. 73).

Cross-dressing for Hall is not a masquerade. It stands for the New Woman’s rebellion against the male order and, at the same time, for the lesbian’s desperate struggle to be and express her true self. Two years exiled from Morton, Stephen, now her own woman with a profession, wears tailored jackets, has nicotine-stained fingers, and keeps her hair cropped “close like a man’s.”<sup>33</sup> No matter how “wrong” she seems to the world, Stephen herself grows “fond of her hair” (p. 210).

32. Gilbert (n. 18 above), p. 206.

33. For the New Woman of the twenties, cutting off traditionally long hair was a daring act with enormous practical and symbolic implications. It was never a neutral act.

The New Woman's modernity and aspiration to male privilege already had been associated with cross-dressing in *The Lamp*. But in *The Well*, Hall, like the sexologists, uses cross-dressing and gender reversal to symbolize lesbian sexuality. Unlike the sexologists, however, Hall makes Stephen the subject and takes her point of view against a hostile world. Though men resented Stephen's "unconscious presumption," Hall defends Stephen's claim to what is, in her fictional universe, the ultimate male privilege: the enjoyment of women's erotic love. The mythic man-nish lesbian proposes to usurp the son's place in the Oedipal triangle.<sup>34</sup>

Hall had begun to describe an eroticized mother/daughter relation several years earlier, in *The Lamp*, where presumably the nonsexual framework of the novel as a whole had made it safe:

The mother and daughter found very little to say to each other; when they were together their endearments were strained like those of people with a guilty secret. . . . Joan knew that they never found what they sought and never would find it now, any more. . . . She wanted to love Mrs. Ogden, she felt empty and disconsolate without that love. She longed to feel the old quick response when her mother bent towards her, the old perpetual romance of her vicinity. She was like a drug-taker from whom all stimulant has been suddenly removed; the craving was unendurable, dangerous alike to body and mind. [P. 75]

In this respect only, *The Lamp* is a "closet" novel. Hall, hiding in the old language, describes what is, I believe, a central component of lesbian sexuality—mother/daughter eroticism.<sup>35</sup> I write "eroticism" because sexual desire is distinct from either "identification" or "bonding." A woman can be close to her mother ("bond," "identify") in many ways and yet eroticize only men. Conversely, one can hate one's mother and have little in common with her, as did Radclyffe Hall, and yet desire her fiercely in the image of other women. In my view, feminist psychology has not yet solved the riddle of sexual orientation.

As bold as Hall was, she could not treat mother/daughter eroticism directly in *The Well*; instead, she turned it inside out. Stephen is strangely uncomfortable with all women, especially with her mother. Lady Anna is not a flesh-and-blood woman who, like Mrs. Ogden, can feel "guiltily

34. My use of Freud's concept indicates my conviction that it does begin to explain sexual desire, at least as it operates in our culture. Hall rejected or ignored Freud, presumably because of the implication, which so many drew from his work, that homosexuality could be "cured" (see Faderman and Williams [n. 7 above], p. 41, n. 11).

35. Ruth-Jean Eisenbud asserts that "primary lesbian choice" occurs at about age three, resulting from the little girl's "precocious eroticism" directed toward a mother who is excluding her ("Early and Later Determinates of Lesbian Choice," *Psychoanalytic Review* 69, no. 1 [Spring 1982]: 85–109, esp. 99). Martinez (n. 7 above), whose theme is the mother/daughter relationship in Hall's two novels, ignores the concept of mother/daughter eroticism, rejecting any relevance of the psychoanalytic model.



happy" when her daughter kisses her, "as if a lover held her" (p. 13). Anna is a servile mother of the patriarchy; her daughter's ambiguous gender and explosive sexuality repel her.<sup>36</sup> Stephen, in turn, rejects her mother's role and values, identifying instead with her father (thereby making herself so unpopular with feminist critics). In Hall's terms, one might say that Stephen is so like her father that she assumes his sexuality.

The Oedipal drama is played out, as it often was for boys of the same class, with the maid standing in for the mother. At seven, Stephen's intense eroticism is awakened by Collins (who, as working-class sex object, never gets a first name), in an episode infused with sexual meaning. Collins is "florid, full-lipped and full-bosomed" (p. 16), which might remind informed readers of Ellis's dictum that the good figure counts more with the "congenital invert" than does a pretty face. When the enchanted child reaches out "a rather uncertain hand . . . to stroke [the maid's] sleeve," Collins exclaims, "What very dirty nails!" (p. 17). The invert's hand is a sexual instrument, but it is polluted. Stephen responds by running to scrub her nails. After this episode, thinking of Collins makes Stephen "go hot down her spine," and when Collins kisses her on impulse, Stephen is dumbfounded by something "vast, that the mind of seven years found no name for" (p. 18). This "vast" thing makes Stephen feel like a boy. She dresses as "young Nelson," causing Collins to say, "Doesn't Miss Stephen look exactly like a boy?" to which Stephen answers, "I must be a boy, 'cause I feel exactly like one." When Collins snubs her she is "deflated," dons the hated girls' clothing, and torments her dolls, "thumping their innocuous faces" (p. 20).<sup>37</sup> The end comes when the child sees the footman roughly kiss Collins on the mouth. In a rage she throws a broken flower pot and hits the footman's cheek. Stephen's sympathetic and protective father resolves the situation by firing the domestics.

For modern readers, by this point in the novel the nature of Stephen's feeling is evident. But writing in 1928, Hall had to go farther. She shows us Sir Phillip reading sexologist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and making notes in the margins. Later, after her disastrous passion for a scheming American woman, Stephen reads Krafft-Ebing in her dead father's library and recognizes herself as "flawed in the making."

A high price to pay for claiming a sexual identity, yes. But of those who condemn Hall for assuming the sexologists' model of lesbianism I ask, just how was Hall to make the woman-loving New Woman a sexual being? For example, despite Hall's use of words like "lover" and "passion"

36. Hall makes the mother's fear pretty explicit: when Lady Anna says goodnight to adolescent Stephen, she kisses her quickly on the forehead "so that the girl should not wake and kiss back" (p. 83).

37. In another notable minority novel, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972), the black child heroine hates and torments her white doll. In *The Well*, the heroine hates her doll simply because of its femininity.

and her references to "inversion," her lawyer actually defended *The Well* against state censorship by trying to convince the court that "the relations between women described in the book represented a normal friendship." Hall "attacked him furiously for taking this line, which appeared to her to undermine the strength of the convictions with which she had defended the case. His plea seemed to her, as her solicitor commented later, 'the unkindest cut of all' and at their luncheon together she was unable to restrain 'tears of heartbroken anguish.'"<sup>38</sup>

How could the New Woman lay claim to her full sexuality? For bourgeois women, there was no developed female sexual discourse; there were only male discourses—pornographic, literary, and medical—about female sexuality. To become avowedly sexual, the New Woman had to enter the male world, either as a heterosexual on male terms (a flapper) or as—or with—a lesbian in male body drag (a butch).

Ideas, metaphors, and symbols can be used for either radical or conservative purposes.<sup>39</sup> By endowing a biological female with a masculine self, Hall both questions the inevitability of patriarchal gender categories and assents to it. The mannish lesbian should not exist if gender is natural. Yet Hall makes her the breathing, suffering hero (not the villain or clown) of a novel. Stephen not only survives social condemnation, she also argues her own case. But she sacrifices her legitimacy as a woman and as an aristocrat. The interpersonal cost is high, too: Stephen loses her mother and her lover, Mary. *The Well* explores the self-hatred and doubt involved in defining oneself as a "sexual deviant." For in doing so, the lesbian accepts an invidious distinction between herself and heterosexual women.

Men have used this distinction to condemn lesbians and to intimidate straight women. The fear and antagonism between us has certainly weakened the modern feminist movement. And that is why lesbian feminists (abetted by some straight feminists) are intent on redefining lesbianism as "woman-identification," a model that, not incidentally, puts heterosexual feminists at a disadvantage.<sup>40</sup> Hall's vision of lesbianism as

38. Vera Brittain, *Radclyffe Hall: A Case of Obscenity?* (New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1969), p. 92.

39. The sexologists' discourse, itself hostile to women, "also made possible the formation of a 'reverse' discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified" (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction* [New York: Vintage Books, 1980], p. 102).

40. Superficially, cultural feminism reunites lesbians and straight women under the banner of "female values." As Echols points out, hostility still surfaces "as it did at the 1979 Women Against Pornography conference where a lesbian separatist called Susan Brownmiller a 'cocksucker.' Brownmiller retaliated by pointing out that her critic 'even dresses like a man'" (Echols [n. 1 above], p. 41).

sexual difference and as masculinity is inimical to lesbian feminist ideology.

Like Hall, I see lesbianism as sexual difference. But her equation of lesbianism with masculinity needs not condemnation, but expansion. To begin with, we need to accept that whatever their ideological purposes, Hall and the sexologists were describing something real. Some people, then and now, experience "gender dysphoria," a strong feeling that one's assigned gender as a man or a woman does not agree with one's sense of self.<sup>41</sup> This is not precisely the same thing as wanting power and male privilege—a well-paid job, abortion on demand, athletic prowess—even though the masculine woman continues to be a symbol of feminist aspirations to the majority outside the movement. Masculinity and femininity are like two different languages. Though each of us knows both, most suppress one system and express only the other.<sup>42</sup> Many lesbians, like Stephen Gordon, are biological females who grow up speaking parts of the "wrong" gender language.

Obviously, the more narrow and rigid gender categories are, the more easily one can feel "out of role." And, of course, if there were no more gender categories, gender dysphoria would disappear (as would feminism). However, feminist critiques of traditional gender categories do not yet resolve gender dysphoria because, first, we have made little impact on the deep structures of gender and, second, it appears that

41. Sexologists often use the concept of "gender dysphoria syndrome" synonymously with "transsexualism" to describe the "pathology" of people who apply for gender reassignment surgery. Of course the effort to describe and treat transsexualism medically has been awkward since gender is a cultural construct, not a biological entity. My broader use of "gender dysphoria" is in agreement with some sexologists who limit the word "transsexual" to people who actually have had surgery to alter their bodies. Gender dysphoria, then, refers to a variety of difficulties in establishing conventional (the doctors say "adequate" or "normal") gender identification; intense pain and conflict over masculinity and femininity is not limited to people who request reassignment surgery. See Jon K. Meyer and John Hoopes, "The Gender Dysphoria Syndromes," *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* 54 (October 1974): 447. Female-to-male transsexuals appear to share many similarities with lesbian butches. The most impressive difference is the rejection or acceptance of homosexual identity. Compare *The Well* to the lives described in Ira B. Pauly, "Adult Manifestations of Female Transsexualism," in *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment*, ed. Richard Green and John Money (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), pp. 59–87. Gender dysphoria could very fruitfully be compared with anorexia nervosa, a more socially acceptable and increasingly common female body-image problem. As feminists, we need a much more sophisticated vocabulary to talk about gender. Sexologists are often appallingly conservative, but they also deal with and try to explain important data. See, e.g., John Money and Anke A. Ehrhardt, *Man & Woman, Boy & Girl* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972). For a radical scholarly approach, see Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978). One of the best recent pieces on gender reversal is Pat Califia, "Gender-Bending: Playing with Roles and Reversals," *Advocate* (September 15, 1983).

42. See Money and Ehrhardt, pp. 18–20.

individual gender identity is established in early childhood. Although gender dysphoria exists in some simple societies,<sup>43</sup> it may be amplified by the same sociohistorical processes—radical changes in the economy, in family structure and function, and in socialization—that have given rise to feminism. Why should we as feminists deplore or deny the existence of masculine women or effeminate men? Are we not against assigning specific psychological or social traits to a particular biology? And should we not support those among us, butches and queens, who still bear the brunt of homophobia?

Hall's association of lesbianism and masculinity needs to be challenged not because it doesn't exist, but because it is not the only possibility. Gender identity and sexual preference are, in fact, two related but separate systems; witness the profusion of gender orientations (which are deeply embedded in race, class, and ethnic experience) to be found in the lesbian community. Many lesbians *are* masculine; most have composite styles; many are emphatically feminine. Stephen Gordon's success eclipsed more esoteric, continental, and feminine images of the lesbian, such as Renée Vivien's decadent or Colette's bisexual. The notion of a feminine lesbian contradicted the congenital theory that many homosexuals in Hall's era espoused to counter demands that they undergo punishing "therapies." Though Stephen's lovers in *The Well* are feminine and though Mary, in effect, seduces Stephen, Hall calls her "normal," that is, heterosexual. Even Havelock Ellis gave the "womanly" lesbian more dignity and definition. As a character, Mary is forgettable and inconsistent, weakening the novel and saddling Hall with an implausible ending in which Stephen "nobly" turns Mary over to a man. In real life, Hall's lover Una Troubridge did not go back to heterosexuality even when Hall, late in her life, took a second lover.

But the existence of a lesbian who did not feel somehow male was apparently unthinkable for Hall. The "womanly" lesbian contradicted the convictions that sexual desire must be male and that a feminine woman's object of desire must be a man. Mary's real story has yet to be told.<sup>44</sup>

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43. Harriet Whitehead, "The Bow and the Burden Strap: A New Look at Institutionalized Homosexuality in Native North America," in *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, ed. Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 80–115.

44. Two impressive beginnings are Joan Nestle, "Butch-Fem Relationships," and Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga, "What We're Rollin' Around in Bed With," both in *Heresies* 12 3, no. 4 (1981): 21–24, 58–62. The latter has been reprinted in Snitow, Stansell, and Thompson, eds. (n. 2 above), pp. 394–405.